Ethnomethodology: The Re-Enchantment 
Industry or The Californian Way of 
Subjectivity*

ERNEST GELLNER

A quarter of a century or so ago there was a well-known eccentric in 
Edinburgh who used to accost passers-by on Prince’s Street and ask them—
are you sane? If any replied Yes, he would retort—ah, but can you prove 
it? And, as they could not, he proceeded triumphantly to show them that 
he at any rate could prove his sanity, by producing his own certificate of 
discharge from a mental hospital.

And so it is not merely with one’s sanity, but also with one’s inner and 
private life. Do you have an inner life? You protest you do, and a rich one 
to boot. Ah, but can you prove it? Of course you cannot. Anything you say in 
vindication of your own inner life is highly suspect, being partial and biased 
evidence at the very least, and to the sceptic, it is brazenly circular. As a 
lady once wrote to Bertrand Russell, she was a solipsist and was amazed 
that so few other people were moved by the cogency of her views.

Your own reports do not establish the existence of your inner life: on 
the contrary they only derive such trustworthiness as they may possess from 
the prior assumption of your possession of such an inner life, and thus 
cannot vindicate it without circularity. ‘This is the scandal’ of solipsism, 
as Kant called it.

But though the unaided citizen, challenged on his walk on Prince’s Street 
to provide good evidence of his own inner life, will fail to do so, the scandal 
of undemonstrated privacy no longer exists in sociology. There the inner 
life has at long last been put on a sound scientific basis. For this, if I under-
stand it right, is the aim, essence, and achievement of Ethnomethodology.

It would be hypocritical to claim that the writings of Harold Garfinkel 
are a model of lucidity. Not only are many of his sentences and arguments 
utterly obscure, in what can only be described as a wilful manner, but his 
very standards in this field would seem to be eccentric. He observes (Studies 
in Ethnomethodology, 1967, p. ix)

Parsons’ work, particularly, remains awesome for the... unfailing precision of 
its... sociological reasoning...

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It is possible to admire Parsons for his personal modesty and charm, for the manner in which he has sensitized an American sociological generation to a set of ideas and problems, or the way in which he has provided post-1945 America, all of a sudden inheriting the white man’s burden, with some tools for the new task of thinking about societies other than their own and that of the Navajo. But to admire him for precision of thought suggests that the person saying this has no idea what precision of thought means. But the remark is, I think, significant for the understanding of Garfinkel’s movement. It emerged in a milieu in which thought is not expected to be finely honed.

Though hardly a model of lucidity, two facts at any rate emerge quite clearly from Studies in Ethnomethodology: it is pre-occupied with the inner meanings, to the actors, of their actions; and secondly, it places the study of those inner meanings within the sociological tradition, of which it sees itself as a continuation. It does not abrogate or supplant sociology; it perpetuates and completes it, by an approach which stresses the subjective meaning of conduct.

It has of course its own way of referring to that inner meaning of human conduct: ‘Ethnomethodological studies analyse everyday activities as members’ methods for making . . . activities visibly-rational-and-reportable-for-all-practical-purposes, i.e., ‘accountable’ . . . ’ (p. vii). Accountability appears be the key word; reflexivity, indexicality, and rationality also turn out to be important. The terminology and its nuances are not irrelevant to the understanding of the movement and its ideas. (The undefined term ‘member’, incidentally, seems to refer to anyone—presumably any member of a society or culture.) The most significant point in the above quotation is perhaps the reference to ‘. . . member’s methods for making . . . activities . . . ‘accountable’ . . . ’ (italics mine).

What is significant about this is that ‘accountability’, which seems to mean the fact that our actions are such that we can give accounts of them to ourselves and others—that, as we used to say, they ‘have a meaning’ for us, is not something God-given or inherent in the nature of things, but requires methods for its accomplishment. Accountability is not self-explanatory. Nor is it. In fact, it is not at all clear to me that ethnomethodologists either succeed or even strive to show how this accountability really is achieved; they seem rather, as one would expect from avowed members of the phenomenological tradition, to concentrate on showing what those inner meanings are: description, not explanation of the manner of this achievement, seems to be their line in practice.

Secondly, it does not seem obvious to me that men do use, on individual occasions, any methods at all to make their actions ‘accountable’. A perfectly
possible view, one possessing at any rate *prima facie* plausibility, would be this: it is culture, or language, which provides the ready-made material potential for giving an account of this act or that, and on individual occasions, men simply draw upon this available wealth of characterizations. They draw on an available stock of accounts. If this is so, it would follow that a *culture* (or a language) perhaps does employ some ‘methods’ to make such and such a set of ‘accounts’ available to those who have learned its rules, but that individuals do not use any methods at all to make things accountable—they just fall back on available accounts, without further ado. This is a query about the whole programme which perhaps deserves to be put on record. The voluntaristic element in the movement’s ideas, the suggestion that we use ‘method’ to give ‘accounts’, may be significant for understanding its social roots. Does it not spring forth in a society in which, much more than anywhere else perhaps, cultural traits are optional and contingent? Does it not reflect this characteristic?

But leave that aside. Irrespective of whether they have rightly or unambiguously identified the way in which accountability, in their sense, is problematical, there clearly is merit in seeing and stressing that it is problematical. This property of conduct—that we can give accounts of what we do—is not always either noted, or seen to raise the problems which in fact it raises. It is an ‘accomplishment...known, used, and taken for granted...’ (Garfinkel, op. cit., p. vii). He goes on to say, plausibly, that it is a ‘fundamental phenomenon’. It is not entirely clear how fundamental, how exhaustive and how exclusive. Are the limits of either sociology or ethnomethodology defined by it? Or are other, non-accountable phenomena also to be encountered within the limits of either subject? And if so, is there a theory of the relationship between the accountable and the non-accountable? (If there were, would it be a kind of Marxism in reverse, in which the ‘accountable’, the inner, becomes fundamental, rather than being relegated to the superstructure? And—a question which will inevitably reappear—does this cult of subjectivity, like others, have great difficulty in allowing for ‘false consciousness’, for error? Are the ‘accounts’ self-guaranteeing, self-authenticating, self-sufficient?) These questions spring to mind. Whilst the nature of Harold Garfinkel’s prose makes it impossible ever to be sure just what topics are or are not really dealt with in any given passage, nevertheless one has the impression that these questions remain unanswered.

But still, two points at any rate are clearly visible: this subject is about what actions mean to us, and it remains within the wider bounds of sociology. Now there is a paradox here. Subjectivity used to be always with us, like original sin or B.O., a predicament, encumbrance or embarrassment, and
not a privilege or an achievement. It was an inescapable feature of the human condition, which we knew only too well, too intimately. Some of us might yearn to escape from it, and seek techniques for overcoming it, but we had no need whatever to establish it. Like the strollers on Prince’s Street, we thought we knew full well we were sane, and when challenged to prove it, found the challenge redundant, offensive, or amusing. What we needed least of all was special methods for establishing, identifying, or discovering the features of our own subjectivity. We had privileged access to our own private selves and meanings, and though some philosophers tried (not at all convincingly) to tell us we had nothing of the kind, at least they did not insult us further by telling us that they had privileged access to our subjectivity... No, no, that would really have been too much.

Here one might say, with that snide mixture of resentment and envy which characterizes Europeans talking about America, that Americans really do not do things by halves. As a character in a New Yorker cartoon might have observed, by Jove, if we are going to have subjectivity, we sure are going to have some subjectivity. No half measures here. Subjectivity is going to be put on a proper scientific basis. No longer will it be handled in that impressionistic, slapdash, literary, well... subjective way, in which it used to be handled, if handled at all, Before Garfinkel.

Note that it is all rather like Watsonian Behaviourism in reverse. And it has just the same drive, panache, and messianism. The Behaviourists said that ‘consciousness’ had no meaning; there was no such thing. Now we are told, with similar fervour, that consciousness (renamed accountability), is all over the place, there is no end of it, it’s coming out of everyone’s ears. It is indeed not entirely clear whether anything else exists. Perhaps it is objectivity which has no meaning now? Anyway, whether or not the new subjectivity is exhaustive and all-embracing or not, it is absolutely clear that there is lots and lots of it about, enough to keep us all going for ever, whether as its investigators or as men (‘members’), and so without fear of it being some time absorbed into some impersonal, cold objectivity. This warranty, I suspect, is a very important element in the appeal of Ethnomethodology. And note that, of course, it is central that subjectivity is not merely vindicated, as a realm amongst others: on the contrary, it is made, if not quite exhaustive, at least very crucial and creative. It is our subjectivity which makes the external world. Its independence and externality, its hard given quality, are illusory. We, or at least our meaning-conferring activities, are really the masters and creators. This is a very old doctrine in a very new idiom. The movement stands squarely in the Idealist tradition.

Nevertheless—and this also is important, and is what gives the ideas and style of the movement its distinctive flavour—this is a cult of subjectivity m
the idiom of that scientism which has for some time been the dominant language of the American social sciences. This is why that reference to Parsons's precision of thought was so significant. These guys are, one might say, the romantic reaction to Parsons's classicism, but within the same language.

Let us not overdo this point. Though they do resemble the romantic poets in their fondness for the humble, ordinary aspects of life, in their penchant for somewhat self-consciously seeing these homely things 'for the first time, really', the continuities of their idiom with the scientistic style of thought and expression are at least as important as the revolutionary breaks which they bring. Let us face it, they do not write well, and their stylistic failings spring from these very features—careless neologism, a slapdash indifference to precision and rigour in exposition, an eager willingness to say more and to say it again rather than refining what one had already said, and so forth—which have been noticeable in the sociological world from which they sprang long before their own particular twist was ever heard of. The 1960s were indeed a revolutionary and romantic period, for well known reasons, at least on the major campuses and in California. If one wanted to project or translate its distinctive mood, the cult of subjectivity, the rejection of external structures, into the language and problematik of sociology, then one should quite naturally end up with something just like Ethnomethodology.

So this movement would be the manner in which the subjective, 'Californian' mood enters the otherwise sober, scientistic, sociological segments of the groves of academe. If this social location of the movement is correct, it is dramatically symbolized by various external characteristics of the movement—for instance, its distinctive lecturing style, which certainly owes more to Elvis Presley than it does to Talcott Parsons—the tendency to twist and writhe, to make love to the microphone, to convey by every gesture that spontaneity, subjectivity and self-generated continuity and flow are everything, as opposed to formal structure and extraneous rules. Or again, when I had the unforgettable pleasure of attending a Conference on Ethnomethodology in Edinburgh, it was noticeable, and I think significant that the quality and quantity of ethno-chicks surpassed by far those of chicks of any other movement which I have ever observed—even Far Out Left Chicks, not to mention ordinary anthropo-chicks, socio-chicks or (dreadful thought) philosophy chicks. All this must indicate that there is a great continuity between the culture of this movement and that of the rising youth culture, which supplies it with these perks. The movement has magic, and and it has it for the young.

Though continuous with the culture of the secessio iuvendoris, it is worth making a reservation here: the opting out from square and objective values
is, as indeed is most of the dissidence of the young generation itself, far from total or definitive.

At a very earthy level, there is not the least suggestion that the movement or its members spurn secure positions or material rewards. Not at all. In general, there is only a stress on subjectivity, not on rebellion. Dissidence only enters, if at all, in as far as it is implied by subjectivity: the appeal of the movement and of its ideas in the field of criminology and related studies is clearly connected with the view that deviance is in the eye of the beholder, or rather in the concepts, the labelling practices of the beholders. This facilitates, not so much a re-valuation of values directly, as a reconceptualization of concepts . . . and this may be directed primarily and naturally at those acts of classification of square society which seem harsh, punitive and censorious. Thus rebelliousness enters only in as far as there is a tendency to loosen, corrode, undermine the order-imposing and order-enforcing ideas of society. In other ways, the established order does not appear to be seriously questioned. It is indeed difficult to see how it could be questioned, for criticism would seem to presuppose some objective norm of vantage-point, and it is not clear how such a thing could become available to spirits so deeply attached to their own subjectivity. The movement confers liberation and a kind of sense of superiority on its adherents, but does not require or encourage them to assault the established order.

This absence of any kind of sustained subversiveness is interesting. (The dissidence is largely restricted to hairstyle, lecturing posture and methodology.) No-one knows whether the dissident mood of an important segment of youth in the 1960s was a foretaste of a more general and radical coming dissidence of nearly everyone, as ever more and more people benefit from and become sated with affluence, or whether on the contrary it was merely part of a permanent American pendulum, due to be followed by another wave of McCarthyite conformity, as of the late ’40s and the 1950s. Just suppose that the latter alternative is the correct one, and that we are due for another period of conservatism: the particular movement under discussion has little to fear from an eventual backlash, unlike some other elements in the life of recent years. It is not actually committed to denying any article of the American constitution or credo (or at any rate, no more than is required by an implicit need to cast doubt on any assertions aspiring to objectivity); and more important, it is certainly in no way committed to any un-American loyalty. If the witchhunts come again, its members ought, in all logic at least, to be safe and out of harm’s way. In this respect, as in some others, the movement is reminiscent of American Freudianism, and the strictures made on it by Erich Fromm.8 It offers a moral and conceptual bolthole in each person’s subjectivity, but, over and above the implicit
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devaluation of the objective, external order, it is not subversive, but quietistic and a-political. In somewhat phenomenological spirit, perhaps, it suspends or brackets the external order, rather than inciting to violence against it.

Our contention, that the movement represents the projection, into the language and institutions of North American sociology, of the cultural posture of semi-dissident youth of the 1960s, can also be illustrated from the most celebrated of the ethnomethodological innovations in method—the device which could be described as *throwing* someone (conceptually) by suddenly acting on assumptions quite other than those which the other person takes as self-evident: the son behaves as if he were a lodger, or vice versa. The otherwise invisibly translucent subjective assumptions, pervading the world, are *made* visible by being made ‘anthropologically strange’, through being deliberately defied and flouted by willfully ‘inappropriate’ conduct.

The point of such an exercise is fairly obvious: it highlights the interpretative, meaning-conferring activities of participants, by shocking them out of treating these tacit assumptions as self-evident, and this it does by blandly defying them. The irritation engendered by the defiance of a tacit assumption (this is not *how* *sons* behave . . .) has as its effect that at least the assumption thereafter ceases to be tacit.

Now this famous device, which is virtually the heraldic emblem of the movement, is clearly an application of a general principle which underlies most of the sartorial and other customs of the dissident generation. One wears, blandly and without any stressed irony even, clothes whose historic significance was once definite, formalized and circumscribed, and one does so in contexts which are different from or opposed to the rules which had once governed the use of the habit in question. Thus for instance the anti-Vietnam-war generation had a special penchant for the use of military uniforms, notably the uniform of the army to whose activities it was most opposed, with NCO’s stripes and all. As a writer in a Sunday paper chat column observed, the rules for dressing up are simply that you must dress as for an occasion, but *not* the occasion to which you are actually going. For instance, a full SS dress uniform (preferably worn with a Star of David), is acceptable virtually anywhere, *except* at a reunion of old comrades in Munich. The similarity between these sartorial principles and the methodological device under discussion is obvious. Clothes are roles and roles are clothes. There is a quiet defiance of a rigid, ‘objectifying’ system of roles, displayed by deliberate behaviour such as could only seem wildly incongruous if that objective system or roles and norms still retained its full authority. But by quietly and systematically defying it, one thus deprives that system of its authority. This can be and is also practised in spheres
other than dress. American girls from the more expensive colleges sometimes indulge a kind of polite, wide-eyed, light-hearted, un-argumentative non-comprehension or non-comment on the assumptions of other generations, and a similarly voulu un-troubled concern-free spontaneity in implementing some weird alternative conventions; all this is accompanied by a marked refusal to send out the signals which normally indicate reception or recognition of message—which is meant to convey both total liberation from the conceptual constraints of others, and easy comfort, at-home-ness, in some other and more natural set. In a way, this is a democratization of the aristocratic maxim—Never explain! It is indeed important for this particular technique, to refrain from argument or attempt at persuasion, for that implies anxiety and the existence of some shared and obligatory norms in terms of which the argument would proceed. They neither explain nor question, but proceed in their wide-eyed way. There is no need to explain or to justify, only for each party to do and to think its own thing, in the secure knowledge that no common law binds us all and all kinds of convention are equally possible.

The ethnomethodologists have taken this spirit and device and turned it into a research ploy. This is the sociology of drag, extended from apparel to concepts and roles—plausibly enough. In a sense, this sociology stands Durkheim on his head. Durkheim's central preoccupation was the problem of conceptual constraint—the social constraint on concepts, and concepts as social constraint. This sociology is preoccupied, not with the constraint, but on the contrary with the contingency of concepts, roles and norms. It employs their easy and light-hearted substitutability to bring home that very contingency. It is perhaps a little unclear whether its central point is the sheer existence of a human world created by our own labelling activities, or whether the stress is, in somewhat existentialist spirit, on the freely chosen, un-compulsory, contingent nature of those humanly-created world. ('Le self service de sa conscience libre', as J.-F. Revel characterized Sartre's early position.) Presumably it is a bit of both.

Something should perhaps be said about what seems to be the implications of the method for the style and organization of the movement. This is a matter of interpreting the meaning of their conduct, as it strikes one, in the light of what one knows about their ideas: perhaps a regrettably impressionistic procedure, though it is unclear on what grounds, from its own premisses, the movement could object to it. Perhaps it could. Be that as it may, for better or worse, it may be worth while to record and interpret one's impressions.

The consequence of the meaningful, 'accountable' nature of human and social reality is that there is endlessly rich material ever at one's disposal:
one need merely *look* and record the plethora of meaning in every situation that surrounds one, and comment on it, and there you are... Practitioners of the art do indeed give one the impression that they do not prepare their performances carefully, but prefer to *ad lib* on whatever is in front of them, in front of their mental vision, and then to go on and on and on and on. To come prepared with a well-organized argument might perhaps be seen as a kind of treason (all structures were treason for the young of the 1960s); and it would indicate, presumably, an insensitivity to the indexical nature of human/social reality, to the here-now, ‘reflexive’ and ‘incarnate’ character of ‘accountable’ practices. The consequence is that the performances of these practitioners do indeed tend to be very ‘reflexive’ indeed, in the sense of being largely about themselves. Here there is a further parallel with psycho-analysis and its preoccupation with its own therapeutic relationship. As ethnomethodology does not claim to cure anything, one cannot say that it is itself the disease which it endeavours to cure, but one wonders whether it does not consist largely of the phenomenological account of itself.

So it is reasonable, in terms of their own ideas, that the practitioners should improvise rather than come prepared, and that they should talk about themselves and their own immediate *Lebenswelt*; they bring us what is obvious, and yet it is meant to have the great freshness of that which is *really* seen for the very first time. Previously we had ignored it, just because it is so close, intimate, and seemingly obvious. If what the practitioner tells you seems to you obvious but not fresh, well then—is it not because you *still* haven’t *really* seen it? Here once again there is a host of parallels, logical and stylistic, with psycho-analysis.

It is not quite so immediately obvious why the practitioners should have this tendency to go on and on and on and on, the marked unstoppability trait. From inside their ideas, one could extract the following rationale: anyone who stops, displays remarkable poverty of his own Lebenswelt! He has run out of things to see and comment, with all the freshness of that which is obvious yet seen for the first time, really... so that to trail off into silence is to betray defeat, exhaustion of vision or perception. This reasoning, tacit or other, may well be *a* factor; but I suspect there are others.

There is an aphorism about the difference between American and British styles of conversation. British talk is meant to be like tennis, with the ball going forward and back, the harder, faster and more accurate, the better. American conversation is like cricket: he who holds the floor acts like a batsman, hanging on as long as he can, the longer the better, till the hostess rules him *out*. The lecturing style of the practitioners is certainly of this latter kind. They hang on like grim death, resisting fiercely all attempts to bowl them out.
But there are probably reasons for this comportment over and above it being part of a wider culture. One has the impression that the movement is fairly tense, anticipating and resisting aggression, both inside but also, and above all, from the outside. This is a messianic movement, possessed of much charisma and magic, and in exclusive possession of an important new revelation. The magic which it has for so many followers clearly means that there is much to gain and lose, in terms of admiration, devotion and all the rewards, psychic or other, of charisma. In one way it is a protestant movement (every man a clerk, for every man has access to the new world of 'accountability'), but it uses catholic means (i.e., it is ecstatic and experiential rather than sober and scripturalist). This combination must presumably lead to internal tensions. A whole community of charisma-endowed mediators—with-the-obvious-but-newly-revealed-world cannot but tread on each others toes. The protestant principle gives free entry into the priesthood (can there be privileged access to the Lebenswelt?), but the catholic techniques prevent the use of rational-legal sober methods of settlement of demarcation and priority disputes and conflicts. So the seeds of tension must be there, internally. And that there is fear of and hostility to external critics, is only too manifest.

Now look at the defensive tactics available. Hanging on and batting on relentlessly is a fairly good device, as long as you hold the attention of the audience; if you do, you have passed the ordeal. This is further rationalized by seeing the critic and questioner as one further role, one further artful device, and describing it and him in that style which comes naturally to the movement, rather than concentrating on the content of his queries or criticisms. One participant in the Edinburgh Conference commended the evasion of posed questions, by stressing the 'dangerous role of the questioner', for it is he who chooses the questions . . . (who else could?)

Under criticism, there is a shift to, so to speak, the third person: instead of discussing the criticism and its logical merits, you switch to describing the conflict situation, the critic, his stance, and so on. This in a way neutralizes him, at worst puts him and the position he criticized on the same level, as fellow participants in the same social, 'accountable' situation; but in the end it does even better than this—it by-passes the issue of the content and logical validity of the criticism, which is demoted, so to speak, from the extra-territorial status of a critic, to becoming but one further character inside the play, and the play is then interpreted by the rules of the movement itself.

This tendency to switch from considering the critic's argument, to describing him and the conflict situation is of course strikingly parallel with psycho-analytic procedures for dealing with criticism, but it also fits in well
with the \textit{ad lib}, here-now descriptive style favoured by the movement. Instead a prepared lecture, the practitioner seems to prefer the stance—a meaningful thing happened to me on the way to the lecture... and then he goes on and on; and any criticism can then be treated as one further meaningful, 'accountable' event.

This strong \textit{reflexive} tendency means that the objective world evaporates, asymptotically approaches zero, as perhaps it is meant to, just as psycho-analysis tends to retreat from theory or interpretation to stress on the therapeutic here-now relationship itself. It is like the man who was so entranced with watching his reactions to the play that he failed to watch the play. In the end, is there any play? The movement has not merely discovered indexicality for sociology, it is itself the most indexical thing going.

One should add that despite the mystical-communicative stance of its relation to its chosen reality (as opposed to the use of pre-established rules for determining what is to count as true), which must encourage free-lance individual messianism, one nevertheless has the strong impression that the important practitioners have a well developed, and at least partially enforced, sense of hierarchy and of ranking among themselves. The most conspicuous unwillingness to formulate and articulate the abstract, general principles of the doctrine (rationalized variously, e.g., by appeal to its rapid development which makes \textit{everything} out of date), seems inspired at least in part by the fact that licences to articulate versions of doctrine are only granted very sparingly by leaders, and are seldom delegated, or practised in their absence. The leader's authority would seem sufficient to discourage defiance of this custom. In any case, caught between the danger of such disapproval and disavowal from above, which involves losing face inside the movement, and on the other hand perhaps being verbally defeated by an outside critic, the practitioner may in any case have little temptation to transgress in this matter. Also the subjective nature both of the reality under investigation, and the methods employed for investigating it, give the practitioner, if tempted to make a bid for doctrinal independence from his leader or leaders, little confidence in having some independent outside norm to which he could appeal to sustain and defend his stand. Heretics in this Church have no scripture which they could invoke against some Council of Constance. As stated, this movement is protestant only in its implicit egalitarianism, the inevitably universal accessibility of the realm of 'accountable acts' which it has discovered; but it is \textit{not} protestant in possessing some unambiguous external repository of truth, some Scripture, to which the man accused of heresy could appeal in order to defend himself. They have discovered accountability, but it is not clear that they are accountable to anyone or anything. The world which validates assertions is a private world. The lack
of extraneous norms, as reactionaries often remind us, can make us less rather than more free.

The movement is a species of idealism, with its stress on a world-creating subjectivity, and like others of its kind, it faces a problem when it comes to the notion of error. How can we be in error about a world which we ourselves have made? The problem is only accentuated by a specific feature which we have already commented on, namely the ubiquity, pervasiveness, and contrast-lessness of its material: an ethnomethodologist does not need to prepare and bring his material, it is always to hand, always underfoot. But if so, what could count as not being material? Not only is error itself a bit of a mystery, but even the mere absence of the proper kind of cognition is barely conceivable. When would we be without this material?—and when could it ever be mistaken?

At this specific level, there is once again a parallel between ethnomethodology and psycho-analysis. The ubiquity of psycho-analytic material is explained differently, it is true, by means of a theory concerning the revealing role of free-association. In ethnomethodology, it is the pervasiveness of meaning, ‘accounting’, which does the same job. But how, in principle, does or can psycho-analysis distinguish between raw free association and valid interpretation? Similarly, how can ethnomethodology distinguish between any old bit of accounting, and the kind of accounting that can be hailed as a piece of science? In these systems, the very boundary between knowing and being would seem to disappear. Knowing would seem to reduce to exemplification, to the concrete presence, so to speak, or perhaps only one which is authoritatively conjured up by the Master Practitioner of the new technique? How can one distinguish? How indeed. In psycho-analysis, this problem of demarcation or distinction between the raw object and interpreted understanding of it is solved through ritual status: the movement distinguishes various sacramental states, and valid interpretations can be distinguished from raw free association in terms of the identity of the propounder. Formally, ethnomethodology cannot do this, for as far as I know, it lacks any such theory of sacramental states or priestly status. In practice, one has the impression that nevertheless, it does employ such a method: that its hierarchy and structure, though unformalized and not underpinned by any explicit theory, is very clearly articulated and present to the minds of its members, who can tell the status of an ‘account’ from the status of the accouter.

So much for one’s impressionistic profile of the movement. To be properly understood, however it needs also to be set against a wider background. It does not stand alone in the world; on the contrary, it is but one specimen or exemplar of much wider and important trends.

As stated, it can usefully be seen as Behaviourism-in-reverse—the
enthusiastic resuscitation, the ‘scientific’ vindication of the fact that we all live in our private worlds. Privacy is no longer abandoned to the Joyces and Prousts of this world, but can be formally taught and most scientifically authenticated.

But the contemporary resuscitation of the human world, of life as lived and conceptualized, as it is ‘accounted’, in life rather than in abstract explanation, has certain distinctive features, which are exemplified not merely by this movement, but also by others. The formulation of the Inner/Outer opposition is no longer individual and sensuous, but collective and conceptual. This might be characterized as the Husserlian rather than the Berkeleian way to re-enchantment, to the vindication of the lived world, against the impersonality of non-indexical science. Berkeley, wishing to avoid a cold and scientific/materialistic world, stressed that the real is what is perceived, and thus gave us a warm world of sensuous consciousness only. But that was also, notoriously, a lonely and individualistic world, within which it became very difficult to give an account of the existence of other consciousnesses. Now that is not at all the contemporary way to re-enchantment: the characteristic contemporary way is through concepts, not through sensations. Our daily concepts are vindicated by appealing to the alleged fact that they constitute, pervade or construct the world we live in. The Lebenswelt is not the sensory screen of a lonely individual, but the shared conceptual wealth of a society, culture, or language.

Behaviourism, through its dramatic exaggerations, symbolized that cold disenchanted world in which supposedly only ‘scientific’, only scientific concepts were allowed, and others, especially those connected with introspection and consciousness, were proscribed. Movements such as ethnomethodology re-legitimate our daily notions, by making them simultaneously the object and the tool of a reputedly respectable scientific inquiry. If sociologists study this, or use it in their inquiries, then, plainly, it must be real. Thus the movement in effect offers a comforting, reassuring, home-restoring ontology. There is a story about German students who were told by their Professor of Philosophy that they, the students, had a real existence, and who went wild with joy on being given this information. Ethnomethodology also teaches us that our daily lived world and experience are real, and we can and do rejoice in this.

But note that it is done by vindicating our daily concepts. (I am not suggesting for one moment that Berkeley’s way, achieving a similar end by absolutizing the world of our senses, was a better way.) And here there are some problems and dangers.

Our world is indeed socially generated by the concepts we employ. The concepts we employ therefore also constrain us, for they ‘make’ the world
in which we act. So be it. There is obviously some degree of truth in all this.

The conceptual generation and saturation of our world is of course ethnomethodology’s debt to phenomenology. It is the stress on concepts, rather than sensations, as world-bricks, or at least the bricks of our world, which sharply distinguishes this tradition from that of empiricism. It is our concepts which make our world, and so constrain us.

But consider the dangers here. There is a kind of a slide.

2. Concepts constrain.
3. It is mere concepts which constrain.
4. Only concepts ever constrain.

There is a tendency to slide from 1 through 2 and 3 to 4. There is thus a tendency to end in a position which might be characterized, paraphrasing Freud, as the fantasy of the Almacht des Begriffes, the omnipotence of the concept.

It is not at all clear that the movement under discussion does slide, unambiguously and irrevocably, into any such position. For one thing, its own formulations of its own position are simply not clear enough to enable one to tell just where it stands on this crucial issue. More positively, there are passages in Garfinkel’s ‘What is Ethnomethodology?’ which could bear the interpretation that they are designed to ward off this very danger. But, whether or not it can be shown that the movement is guilty of this extreme position, it is also not easy to show that it is innocent of it. And, most certainly, it cannot, given the topics and problems which interest it, evade the question. What then is the relation of conceptual to other constraints? If it has failed to deal with it in a lucid manner, then this must be held against it. It simply is not an issue which it can evade.

The truth of the matter seems to me this: concepts do indeed constrain us. But they are not the only thing which constrains us. Our life is lived in an environment whose constraints are at least in part physical, in the sense of being independent of the conventions, ideas, and expectations of the society which harbours us. Concepts do not kill or nourish; but killing and nourishing are socially important. The two kinds of constraint, conceptual and extraneous, pervade each other and are fused with each other in a complex and bewildering manner. For instance, a physical imperative may leave open a number of ways of executing its demands, not all of which however are socially permissible, ‘conceivable’. Or a conceptual imperative may be disguised as a physical one, to give it an extraneous authority. And so on. The complications are endless. It is no doubt one of the tasks of sociology to disentangle this. But how well can it be done by a ‘methodology’
which seems to have so strong a predilection towards the conceptual? Even
if it does not formally preclude the Other, does it retain any real sensitivity
for it?

And it is open to the suspicion that it is indeed defective in such sen-
sitivity. This point has been forcefully made by Professor Zygmunt Bauman:

Ethnomethodologists claim to have a particular knack for descending to the level
of ‘everyday life’ from the abstract heights of the official sociology inhabited by
imaginary homunculi. But it is a strange everyday life they descend to: hardly
anybody eats there his everyday bread, even less bakes it, let alone earns it—
though, as a naive observer would say: eating and baking and earning bread seem
to constitute eighty percent of the everyday life of eighty percent of everyday
life.4

Perhaps Bauman’s hypothetical observer is indeed naive: in California,
where the movement is based, baking bread certainly, and earning it most
probably, do not take up eighty percent of the time of that segment of the
population which provides ethnomethodology with its avid clientele. We
shall have occasion to return to this point, for the local and specific roots of
the movement are interesting and significant. Still, in as far as the movement
claims to have universal human validity, Bauman’s point is important.
This is not everyone’s Lebenswelt. In Leeds and in Poland, people still need
to earn their daily bread, and in Poland daily bread can perhaps still be,
as it is in the Lord’s Prayer, problematical. But all this highlights the move-
ment’s lack of sensitivity to constraints other than conceptual ones.

There is a further point. It is important to distinguish between concepts
as constraints, and the constraints on concepts. Concepts (or their absence)
are indeed a means of social control: they inhibit options by making them
unthinkable, or only thinkable with opprobrium. But concepts and their
authority, such as it is, are not self-explanatory: the bounds of applicability
of a notion needs itself to be explained.

Cancerous semantic growths are happily not common, but they can and
do occur: the problem of deviance and conformity arises for the delimitation
of meanings, as it does for any other human activity. This boundary-
maintenance needs to be explained, not taken for granted. Again, the
movement under discussion is ironically open to the suspicion that it
encourages us to take this for granted, that it obscures the very existence of
the problem. The world of meanings or accounts is not endlessly permissive—
but how are the limits set?

That these dangers or insensitivities are present, as dangers, in the general
attitude adopted and encouraged by the movement, can hardly be in dispute.
It cannot be demonstrated that these are more than dangers, more than
mere possibilities. But the reason why it cannot be shown is not so much
because the dangers have been carefully avoided, as because the slapdash, wilfully obscure and undisciplined verbosity makes it impossible to be sure just precisely what it is that is being said. In such conditions, neither guilt nor innocence are evident.

It is worth considering the general and specific roots of this cult of subjectivity. The subjective tends to become an object of a cult only when it has become precarious. The cult of the subjective, the human, the conceptual, the Lebenswelt, gains in importance as a reaction to an external, mechanical, mathematicized, impersonal world.

All this merely helps locate the movement within a much wider, indeed an immense tradition, which starts perhaps with Vico’s reaction to Descartes, and reaches its height with the romantic and idealist reaction to the Enlightenment. Fichte, telling us how the ego rolls its own world, rather than accepting it ready-supplied in conventional realist fashion by some external Other, might well be claimed as a key ancestor by the contemporary representatives of this attitude. But the really important and formative influence behind them is of course phenomenology.

Edmund Husserl’s central idea was simple. It was to put philosophy on a scientific basis, and to endow it with a special field of inquiry at the same time, by giving it as its special area the world ‘bracketed’, the world as we experience/conceptualize it, but so to speak suspended, without reference to its reality or lack of it. We were to look at our world as our world, and no more.

Now the whole idea of ‘bracketing’ the world, of looking at it as we live it, seems to imply that someone else is doing something else, is somehow refraining from bracketing, and is judging the world. And, indeed, this is so. The phenomenological suspension, which is to give us the world as we live it, in a kind of pure state, does stand contrasted with some other attitude, which does have its doubts about the reality of the Lebenswelt.

It is here that phenomenology makes its crucial mistake.

When the Lebenswelt really was a Lebenswelt, no one called it by any such name. Try to convey to a member of a primitive society the need to see the world he lives in as the world he lives in: he does indeed live in it, but he would have difficulty in grasping what other world he is meant to contrast it with. The Lebenswelt and the world are then one.

The Lebenswelt has only become conceptualizable as such, has become so to speak visible, just because we no longer altogether live in it. We do not live in our Lebenswelt—not altogether. It has become, as the ethnomethodologists might say, anthropologically strange. It is no longer the world; it is already a mere ‘Lebenswelt’, it is already bracketed, not by phenomenology, but by life itself. We already see it as a vision, amongst
others, and a somewhat suspect one, which is authoritative only in its own terms and by its own interior standards, but about whose standing as a whole we have our doubts. We know that it was our world; we are not sure whether it is the world. We suspect that ultimate and effective reality is articulated in some other idiom, that the world which can claim our real cognitive allegiance is not the old inherited Lebenswelt, but contains it, as one very partial, selective, perspective-distorted vision within it.

The Lebenswelt is now like a living room in a house in which there are many other rooms. It is a kind of parlour which contains the family’s antiques and which has a pleasing olde worlde air about it. This is perhaps where the family meets on formal occasions but this is not where important work is done or important business transacted.

Such is the Lebenswelt. The irony is, we have only come to be aware of it when we no longer live in it, at any rate not exclusively or predominantly. Phenomenology claims to ‘suspend’ it, to suspend judgment about its reality-status, to see it simply as a Lebenswelt. But that, precisely, is what it no longer is. And by pretending to ‘suspend’ it, phenomenology in fact covertly fortifies it, it ratifies it by a kind of sleight-of-hand; by seeming to exempt it from even entering and competing in the scientific reality-stakes, it implies that at least simply qua Lebenswelt, in its more modest pretensions, its status cannot be in any doubt. Qua Lebenswelt at least it is secure and vindicated... But that is not so. The world we ‘live’ in is itself unstable, shifting, multiple, complex and ramified. Trivial day-to-day decisions may perhaps be taken against a background picture articulated in old, homely, inherited, Lebenswelty terms; but when it comes to important decisions, we look to the reality behind the muddled shorthand of daily convenience.

Ethnomethodology has inherited this unintended and half-covert ambiguity from phenomenology. Does it ratify the ‘accountable’ world of daily experience, or does it highlight its optional, problematical nature? It does both, in effect. It makes a fuss of its importance, but also stresses its problematical nature. Yet it stresses the ultimacy of that world more than its problematical nature. Thereby it ratifies.

But within this general tradition, what distinguishes ethnomethodology perhaps is that there seems to be a special stress on the contingent, self-created nature of the world we inhabit. It is an artful achievement, it appears, to erect such a world at all... but the artfulness could equally be deployed at constructing some other world. The fragility or contingency of the effects achieved by this ‘artfulness’ seem to be something specially highlighted by the practitioners of this technique and style. And this would bring us to the specific social roots of this movement. Its general roots are the need for
re-enchantment, for ratification of the old human world. But there are also specific roots.

Max Weber thought that rational industrial production brought with it the cold ‘disenchanted’ vision of the world, from which a few self-indulgent intellectuals escaped by means of decorating their private chapels with all kinds of exotica and antiques. Daniel Bell has argued⁵ that there is an incoherence between the orderly and rational organization of our production, and current culture, with its rejection of structure and discipline. But that may be a mistake. Perhaps the two are quite congruent now. A really advanced industrial society does not any longer require cold rationality from its consumers; at most, it may demand it of its producers. But as it gets more advanced, the ratio both of personnel and of their time is tilted progressively more and more in favour of consumption, as against production. More consumers, fewer producers; less time at work, more at leisure. And in consumption, all tends towards ease and facility of manipulation rather than rigour and coldness. A modern piece of machinery may be a marvel of sustained, abstract, rigorous engineering thought; but its operating controls must be such that they can easily and rapidly be internalized by the average user, without arduousness or strain. So the user lives in a world in which most things have an air of easy, ‘natural’, ‘spontaneous’ manipulability. And why should not the world itself be conceived in this manner? Why should cognition, conceptual construction, not come just as easily as handling the now so-simple controls of a car? The culture of undisciplined spontaneity mirrors, rather than defies, the economic base of our society.

Why not indeed. This general facility of the world and of cognition, inherent in the tilting of the balance in favour of the life of consumers rather than producers, is further reinforced in America by the populist, anti-intellectual tradition, the protestantism of the heart rather than of the Book, which has prepared the ground for such doctrines. So when the general need to re-enchant the world is felt, when warm individuality, privacy, subjectivity are to be vindicated against the external, the abstract, the impersonal, then a cult of easy, spontaneous, immediate cognition or erection-of-the-world comes naturally as the expected thing. The modernist theologians have already habituated us to an Instant God, created in no time by mere ‘concern’, or by the mere act of worship. Here we also have an Instant World, and an Instant Subjectivity, the two supplied jointly as two complementary products.

Thus the very general roots are the widely shared need, to vindicate the human world as lived (or rather as it used to be lived)—against the encroachment of the world as seen through those cold abstract concepts which confer explanatory and manipulative control, at the cost of ignoring the individual,
the specific, the private. But, in the most 'modern' state of the richest and most industrially advanced country of the world, the private and the subjective in both in greater danger, and also more free from constraint, than it is anywhere else. The combination of rootlessness and willingness to innovate, the American freedom from excessive deference to some keepers of Cultural Norms, (all traits acclaimed as an American birth-right), in a very newly settled and very rich land, have led to a situation where anything is possible, anything goes. The homogeneity of car, freeway, supermarket, suburb and countryside, the impersonal grid landscape, somehow coexists with an extraordinary liberation, permitting any spiritual, sartorial, architectural, sexual fantasy. On the sub-structure of the most advanced and most standardized industrial society, there emerges a kind of luxuriant and luxurious, willing anomic ... And who is to say in the end which is superstructure and which is substructure?

Official sociology (which on the whole the ethnmethodologists do not claim to supersede, but only to complement), with its somewhat stilted terminology, its search of general theory constructed on a rectilinear and abstract design, is like that linear system of freeways and grid suburban streets and houses; whilst these wild techniques for seizing or eliciting the hidden private life are like those oriental esoteric shrines and practices which yet flourish in the impersonal concrete wilderness. So the privacy which is investigated here is not so much human subjectivity in general, which is often constrained, anguished, and fused, harmoniously or painfully, with the externalized aspects of human life; rather it is this very specific, volatile, unconstrained, fantaisiste, Californian kind of subjectivity. It seizes the spirit of a conceptual constraint which is more conceptual than constraining, in which the optional aspect of roles or concepts is more conspicuous than their compulsiveness.

The research devices they employ would, in a caste society, mean pollution; in an estate society, breach of the law; and in an old class society, social solecism. But here, they are possible. The lid is off: neither poverty nor deference to authority constrain cultural expression which is both expansive and luxurious, and yet is somehow haunted by a sense of its own contingency. The Durkheimian problem of conceptual necessity is replaced by the account of conceptual 'artfulness' and contingency; and this is perhaps symbolized by the flamboyant manner in which the practitioners conflate or oscillate between a professorial and a pop or DJ style of exposition. Yet, at the same time, they do not altogether defy or forget the socio-economic base of their own liberation, of le self-service de leur conscience libere. Their method offers a kind of do-it-yourself-kit for everyone to make/ find their own subjectivity: and the need to supply such a thing at all
suggests that the recipients are no longer all too sure that they really have a privacy or subjectivity at all. They need to be shown their own subjectivity, to have it supplied like those prefabricated ethnic meals which emulate, say, the menu of the Mexican peasant, but come all ready on tin foil, so that all you need do is put it in the oven for 15 minutes and then eat it in front of your TV.

The pre-packaged ready-cooked and so very contingent subjectivity is similarly convenient; is, so to speak, an industrial, supermarket, ready-to-eat subjectivity. You just warm it up. When Max Weber spoke scathingly of the intellectuals who furnished their private chapels with spiritual exotica and indulged in intellectual antiquarianism, he clearly had in mind an élite hobby, which presupposed privileged access to leisure and resources. It was hand-made Re-enchantment for the Few. But one of the advantages of the affluent society, of the further advance in the equalization of conditions, is that re-enchantment itself is now pass-produced, standardized, and rationalized. Subjectivity, like the Mexican peasant’s meal, is no longer produced in the mud hut of the pueblo; specialists will prepare and package for mass-consumption a variant of it which, when all is said and done, is almost as palatable and perhaps much more hygienic. So let us welcome the day when we can be reassured of the existence of our own subjectivity, and be supplied with tools for locating or erecting it, in a way which is no longer restricted to a privileged élite, nursing its nostalgia for enchantment like a badge of rank; but, on the contrary, which is supplied so as to make both the nostalgia and its solace available to all.

London School of Economics

NOTES
1 For an excellent discussion of such problems, see Bill McSweeney, ‘Meaning, Context and Situation’, European Journal of Sociology, 14, 1973, 137-53