Sociology from Women's Experience: A Reaffirmation

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The discussion of my work by Pat Hill Collins, Bob Connell, and Charles Lemert is generous and very much appreciated. My difficulty in responding is that each develops a critique from a very different theoretical stance.[1] Lemert brings to bear his interest in what he describes as the sociological dilemma of the subject-object relation, and the postmodernist critique of modernity and its unitary subject. Pat Hill Collins draws on the tradition of critical theory, strikingly informed by her experience of and commitment to recovering the suppressed feminist thought of black women. Connell works within a Marxist tradition and with specific concerns about the relation of sociology to political practice. Also, each constructs her or his own straw Smith. Lemert reads the project of an inquiry *beginning from* women's experience as a sociology *of* women's *subjective* experience. Collins reads into my project her objective of creating a transformative knowledge. Connell confounds beginning from experience with individualism, and inter-prets my rather careful (and critical) explications of the conceptual practices of power as an abhorrence of abstractions in general.

In response I will clarify how I've understood and worked for a sociology beginning from women's experience. It is not, I insist, a totalizing theory. Rather it is a *method of inquiry,* always ongoing, opening things up, discovering. In addition, to reemphasize its character as inquiry relevant to the politics and practice of progressive struggle, whether of women or of other oppressed groups, this essay refers to some of the work being done from this approach.

STANDPOINT

The very intellectual successes of the women's movement have created their own contra-dictions. Though they follow from the powerful discovery of a world split apart—we learned to see, act, and speak from a ground in our experience as women—the intellectual achievements of feminism have woven texts over that original moment. Indeed Connell's question "If the 'standpoint of women' is not an extralocal abstraction, what would be?" reflects (as criticism) the distance between the theorizing of "standpoint" and what I thought I was talking about, working from, trying to build into a sociology.

My project is a sociology that begins in the actualities of women's experience. It builds on that earlier extraordinary moment, unlike anything I've experienced before or since, a giving birth to ourselves—slow, remorseless, painful, and powerful. It attempts to create a method of inquiry beginning from the site of being that we discovered as we learned to center ourselves as speaking, knowing subjects in our experience as women.

When I first began this sociological project, I and others used notions such as "women's

perspective," "women's experience," "women's standpoint" to express this singular move—the foundation of this phase of the women's movement. Particularly since Sandra Harding's (1986) study of *The Science Question in Feminism,* the concept of "standpoint" has been used to formalize such notions and subject them to a critique. Formalization is inevitable, but it also breaks connection with the original experience that sought expression in a variety of terms. My own attempts to express the project probably contribute to this process, though I wish they would not. Only when I encounter critiques, for example those of Lemert and of Harding herself, or Connell's version, which seems both to be correct and to miss the point altogether, do I become aware that in my own thinking I still rely on the original and extraordinary discovery. Can I explicate it better than I have, in this new context, where feminist theorizing has developed to such a sophisticated level and where even the notion of subject that we used to rely on (see Schutz 1962, for example) is called into question?

The experience, of course, was complex, individualized, various. It's hard to recall now that at that time we did not even have a language for our experiences of oppression as women. But we shared a method. We learned in consciousness-raising groups, through the writings of other women (I relied a great deal on the rich and marvelous poetry that feminists were writing at that time), in talk, and through an inner work that transformed our external and internal relationships. We explored *our experience as women* with other women—not that we necessarily agreed or shared our experiences.

In those early days, taking the standpoint of women transformed how we thought and worked, how we taught, the social relationships of the classroom, almost every aspect of our lives. Remaking sociology was a matter that arose out of practical demands. Established sociology distorted, turned things upside down, turned us into objects, wasn't much use. I thought we could have a sociology responding to people's lack of knowledge of how our everyday worlds are hooked into and shaped by social relations, organization, and powers beyond the scope of direct experience. The theorizing of "standpoint" within feminist discourse displaces the practical politics that the notion of "standpoint" originally captured. The concept is moved upstairs, so to speak, and is reduced to a purely discursive function.

In exploring our experiences we talked with, wrote to and for, women, beginning with what we shared as women, our sexed bodies. Here was and is the site of women's oppression, whether of violence, of rape, of lack of control over our choices to have children, through our connectedness to our children, or through childbirth and suckling. To declare this is not to formulate essentialism or biological determinism. Women's experience of oppression, whatever its form and focus, was grounded in male control, use, domination of our bodies. No transcendence for us. We were irremediably (as it seemed) defined by our bodies' relevance for and uses to men.

I emphasize this embodied ground of our experiencing as women. Much feminist theorizing since this original moment has taken up the standpoint in text-mediated discourse for which Descartes wrote the constitution. The Cartesian subject escapes the body, hence escaping the limitations of the local historical particularities of time, place, and relationship. When we began with our experiences as women, however, we were always returning to ourselves and to each other as subjects *in our bodies.*

I'm not talking about *reflecting* on our bodily existence or describing our bodily experience. The consciousness raising of this phase of the women's movement did not *reflect* on the body from a discursive standpoint. But the sexed body was always the common ground in relation to which we could find ourselves with each other *as women,* even if only to discover the depth of our differences. Of course our experiences in this mode were multiple and various, and as we sought in them a common ground, we also

disagreed, sometimes bitterly—fierce fights and divisions were endemic. It was a lot of work to arrive at shared political projects. But what we could have in common was explored through experiences grounded in our sexed bodies, our women's bodies. Exploring the varieties of our experience returned us to the site of our bodily being to rediscover, remake ourselves, stripping away the inner and outer restraints and constraints. We sought our grounding in what was there for us when we took up the particularized, localized, *felt* experiencing of a subject who is not divorced from her bodily site of being.

I certainly think that other sociological transformations may be created from other sites of oppression, although I don't think (as Connell seems to do) that it is the oppositional which defines the standpoint. I am so bold as to believe that there's something distinctive about the standpoint of women as I've expressed and experienced it, and have tried to build it into a method of sociological inquiry. Its distinction is this: that the standpoint of women situates inquiry in the actualities of people's living, beginning with their experience of living, and understands that inquiry and its product are in and of the same actuality.

For me, then, the standpoint of women locates a place to begin inquiry before things have shifted upwards into the transcendent subject. Once you've gone up there, settled into text-mediated discourse, irremediably stuck on the reading side of the textual surface, you can't peek round it to find the other side where you're actually *doing* your reading. You can reflect back, but you're already committed to a standpoint other than that of actual people's experience.

I'm not arguing against abstractions, as Connell seems to think (this would indeed be a contradiction). And I'm not concerned merely with "discrediting" (Connell) or "deconstructing" (Collins) the relations of ruling. I'm concerned with examining and explicating how "abstractions" are put together, with concepts, knowledge, facticity, as socially organized practices. Making these processes visible also makes visible how we participate in and incorporate them into our own practices (see "The Politics and the Product" below). In explicating the social relations of knowledge, I am concerned also with redesigning them. My notion of an everyday world as problematic is just such an attempt—to redesign the social organization of our systematically developed knowledge of society.

Theorizing the standpoint of women contradicts the project I am addressing. Interpreting that project in those terms misinterprets it. All three critics argue that my project necessarily privileges a particular experience. Lemert, for example, asks whether I do not do "sociology with exceptional, if not exclusive, attention to one specific and gendered subjective experience of the actual world[.]" It's true that I begin with what I learned from my own experience of two worlds of consciousness and their relations (so, incidentally, did Descartes), but the formulation of a method of inquiry that I developed in fact works to make a space into which anyone's experience, however various, could become a beginning-place inquiry. "Anyone" could be an Afro- or Chinese or Caucasian Canadian, an individual from one of the First Nations, an old woman or man, a lesbian or a gay man, a member of the ruling class, or any other man.

I draw a contrast between beginning with the standpoint of women and standpoints constituted in text-mediated discourse. The categories that identify diversity (race, gender, class, age, and so forth) for Collins, oppositional sites for Connell, and fragmented identities for Lemert are categories of such discourse and of discursively embedded political organization and activism. To begin with the categories is to begin in discourse. Experiencing as a woman of color, as Himani Bannerji (1987) has pointed out, does not break down into experience as a woman and experience as a person of color. Roxana Ng (1988) has explored how the category "immigrant women" is constituted in the social relations of the Canadian state and labor market. The latter study in particular calls into question Haraway's (1985) derivation of identities from the discursive fragmentation of

social categories (cited by Lemert). Are we really to be stuck with Althusser's (1971) condemnation of the subject to lasting dependency on being interpellated by "ideological state apparatuses"? Of course no one's citing Althusser these days, but Haraway follows the same path from discourse to subjectivity, from discursive category to identity. I want to go another way.

If I could think of a term other than "standpoint," I'd gladly shift, especially now that I've been caged in Harding's (1986) creation of the category of "standpoint theorists" and subjected to the violence of misinterpretation, replicated many times in journals and reviews, by those who speak of Hartsock and Smith but have read only Harding's version of us (or have read us through her version). My notion of standpoint doesn't privilege a knower. It does something rather different. It shifts the ground of knowing, the place where inquiry begins. Since knowledge is essentially socially organized, it can never be an act or an attribute of individual consciousness.

As I see it, the notion of standpoint works like this: Social scientific inquiry ordinarily begins from a standpoint in a text-mediated discourse or organization; it operates to claim a piece of the actual for the relations of ruling of which that discourse or organization is part; it proceeds from a concept or theory expressing those relations and it operates selectively in assembling observations of the world that are ordered discursively. The standpoint of women proposes a different *point d'appui:* It begins one step back before the Cartesian shift that forgets the body. The body isn't forgotten; hence the actual site of the body isn't forgotten. Inquiry starts with the knower who is actually located; she is active; she is at work; she is connected with particular other people in various ways; she thinks, laughs, desires, sorrows, sings, curses, loves just here; she reads here; she watches television. Activities, feelings, experiences, hook her into extended social relations linking her activities to those of other people and in ways beyond her knowing. Whereas a standpoint beginning in text-mediated discourse begins with the concepts or schema of that discourse and turns towards the actual to find its object, the standpoint of women never leaves the actual. The knowing subject is always located in a particular spatial and temporal site, a particular configuration of the everyday/everynight world. Inquiry is directed towards exploring and explicating what she does not know—the social relations and organization pervading her world but invisible in it.

A METHOD OF INQUIRY

Central to this particular sociology for women (I take for granted there's more than one) is a method of inquiry. The notion of a standpoint of women doesn't stand by itself as a theoretical construct; it is a place to begin inquiry. I argue that proceeding (and I emphasize the activity here) according to established methods of inquiry in sociology, beginning in discourse with *its* concepts, and relying on standard good social scientific methodologies produces people as objects. This is an effect of its methods of thinking and inquiry; it is not an effect of the sociologist's intentions. Sociologists' intentions may be as oppositional and as progressive as any of us could wish, but if they work with standard methods of thinking and inquiry, they import the relations of ruling into the texts they produce. (Note, as an aside, that this is not an issue of quantitative versus qualitative method.)

Hence the importance of the method of inquiry, as a method both of thinking about society and social relations, and of doing research—or, as I sometimes prefer to put it, of writing the social into discursive texts. Unlike sociologies that seek to generate a totalizing system, this sociology is always in the making. From different sites of women's experience, different social relations or different aspects of the same complex are brought into view and their organization is explicated. Far from being a dead end, as Connell suggests,

it is a lively, unfolding, fascinating, and very productive method. I am not talking now about my own work, but am referring to the growing body of work, mostly in Canada, that is exploring contemporary social relations by using this approach, an enterprise that is ongoing and not exclusively mine. Those who have taken up such methods of inquiry have taken them in their own direction; there's no orthodoxy. From innovations made in different courses of inquiry, we learn how to do things that we didn't know how to do before, or we see flaws and problems in how we were working. I am struck by the extraordinary expansion of our grasp of how the relations of ruling are put together, and by the effectiveness with which this knowledge can be put to practical use in a variety of contexts.

So let me try to characterize this method of inquiry briefly:

1. The subject/knower of inquiry is not a transcendent subject but is situated in the actualities of her own living, in relations with others. Lemert is quite right when he says that "key to the position is the somewhat open term 'actual.'" Yes, it is a key, and it is not defined. I don't give it content because I use it like the arrow you see on maps of malls, which tells you, "You are here!" I want the term *actual* to be always directing us back to the "outside the text" in which living goes on and in which the text is being read. Of course the text is always in the actual, though we seem to feel that we can escape through the text, riding it like the magic carpet of legend. The "open" term *actual* reminds us of the actuality of the flying carpet, of us who are riding it, and of the ground below.

2. In this method, we're talking about the actual ongoing practices of actual individuals. This ontology is based on Marx and Engels's formulation in *The German Ideology*. Yet we're not concerned just with what individuals do. The sociology I'm proposing is interested in the social as people's ongoing concerting and coordinating of activities. Here I mark a shift away from the social as order or as rules or as meaning, to the social as actually happening and hence as investigatable. This notion owes much to ethnomethodology, except that I want to extend it to macro relations.

3. What I've called the standpoint of women locates us in bodily sites—local, actual, particular. The idea is not to reenact the theory/practice split and opt for practice, but to locate the knower in a lived world in which both theory and practice go on, in which theory is itself a practice, and in which the divide between the two can itself be brought under examination. The entry into text-mediated discourse and the relations of text-mediated discourse are themselves actual. They are the activity of people together, happening, always now. Concepts, beliefs, ideas, knowledge, and so on (what Marxists know as consciousness) are included in this ontology. They are practices, they happen, they are ongoing, and they are integral to the concerting and coordinating of people's activities.

4. Inquiry and its product are forms of social organization. They enter into and may become constituents of social relations. Knowledge itself is not distinct from yet dependent on social practices and contexts, as Flax (quoted by Lemert) holds; rather, it is understood as socially organized. Hence the importance, for this sociology, of investigating social relations as a critique of its own practices as well as those of others. Designing a new organization for sociological knowledge is the project of a sociology for women, and of making the everyday/everynight world a problematic of inquiry.

5. Texts, text mediation, textuality, are central. The text is the bridge between the actual and the discursive. It is a material object that brings into actual contexts of reading a fixed form of meaning that can be and may be read in many other settings by many other people at the same time or at other times. It creates something like an escape hatch out of the actual and is foundational to any possibility of abstraction of whatever kind, including this one written here. The preceding clauses can be read as a set of procedures for writing the social into texts, and hence for exploiting the power of the textual to analyze and

isolate dimensions of organization that are fully embedded in the actualities of living. Of course that writing, that text, its reading, are always ongoing and in the actual. The act of reading is very deceitful in this respect; it conceals its particularity, its being in time and place.

6. Text-mediated relations are the forms in which power is generated and held in contemporary societies. Marx argued that economic relations are a specialization of interdependencies which were previously embedded in direct personal relationships, as in feudalism. With the emergence of money, markets, and capital, these relations become distinct, specialized, and autonomous. Similarly, in contemporary societies, the functions of organization and control are increasingly vested in distinct, specialized, and (to some extent) autonomous forms of organization and relations mediated by texts. I've called these "the relations of ruling." The materiality of the text and its indefinite replicability create a peculiar ground in which it can seem that language, thought, culture, formal organization have their own being outside lived time and the actualities of people's living—other than as the latter become objects of action or investigation from within the textual. But from the viewpoint of this method of inquiry, the textual mediation of these relations and forms of organization has the miraculous effect of creating a join between the local and particular (on one hand) and the generalizing and generalized organization of the relations of ruling (on the other), hence making the latter investigatable in a new way.

From this very summary formulation of the method of inquiry, we return to issues raised by the critics. Lemert thematizes subjective and objective, representing what I'm doing as a sociology of women's, perhaps of anyone's, *subjective* experience. But the standpoint of women locates the knowing subject in the actual, before the differentiation between subjective and objective—a conceptualization of objectifying institutions. To respond to another issue Lemert raises, I do hold that texts or textual technologies are essential to the objectification both of organization and of knowledge, but not, as he seems to suggest, that texts necessarily result in objectification.

Lemert suggests that the postmodernist sealing off of an escape hatch out of text-mediated discourse is merely an issue of postmodernism's "willingness to tolerate the irony and uncertain possibilities of life in a world without comforting certitudes." I disagree. The issue, as far as I'm concerned, isn't comfort or tolerance for ambiguity or appreciation of irony. Rather it is an issue of the reliability and accuracy of the products of inquiry, beginning from the standpoint of women. The product I imagine is an explication, an unfolding, of how things actually are being put together, of actual ongoing social organization. I am also increasingly formulating the enterprise of inquiry as a kind of ongoing dialogue with society, with people, in which the inquirer is always exposed to the discipline of the other—sometimes the other's direct response, but more often how people's activities are actually coordinated. The language of dominant discourse, to use Collins's term, is continually displaced and reworked in the process of trying to "get it right." It is necessarily destabilized because it is always open to being rewritten as it is disciplined by its engagement with the actual.

All three critics treat what I'm doing as derived from or as a synthesis of previous sociological theories. Collins is critical of my "grounding . . . work in sociological theories, yet refusing to embrace fully any one theoretical perspective," and describes it as eclecticism. Connell views it as "synthesis." But if we're talking about actual people and the actual ongoing concerting of activities, there's a common ground—a real world, if you like—to which we can refer. If you're seeking to learn how things actually are put together, that dialogue with the world constrains you. You or I draw on what is available in sociology that we can use in developing inquiry and methods of inquiry. This is neither synthesis nor eclecticism. Obviously I think of what I'm doing as sociology, and use what

I've learned from sociology. But to situate the standpoint governing inquiry in the theo-
retical organization of sociological discourse contradicts the project of beginning from the
standpoint of women "in real life" (to use Marx and Engels's phrase in *The German
Ideology*).

If we are going to do a sociology that serves women, perhaps people in general, it is
crucial to get it right. This objective makes no claim to a unitary, absolute, or final truth
(hence Lemert's application of the Flax paradox doesn't apply). I've used the analogy of
a map. We have maps, we use maps, we rely on maps in a perfectly ordinary and mundane
way. I'm not aiming for the one truth. I'm aiming rather to produce sociological accounts
and analyses that can have this kind of credence: Here is how you get from the Bloor-
Bathhurst intersection to Ossington on the subway line. The map extends my capacity to
move about effectively in the city. It does not tell me everything about the subway system
in Toronto (its technology, operations, organization), but it does tell me the sequence of
stations and gives me some idea of the distance between them. I'd like to develop a
sociology that would tie people's sites of experience and action into accounts of social
organization and relations which have that ordinarily reliable kind of faithfulness to "how
it works."[2]

The project of inquiry from the standpoint of women is always reflexive. Also, it is
always about ourselves as inquirers—not just our personal selves, but our selves as
participants. The metaphor of insider and outsider contains an ambiguity that I should be
more watchful of, for I disagree with Collins's view and Connell's implication that there
is an outside in society. They are directing our attention to issues of marginality, exclusion,
suppressed and oppositional cultures and positions—being outside in that general sense.
But as I've used the metaphor, I've wanted to stress that those outside positions are inside.
In the sense I'm trying to capture, we are inside necessarily, and so there are no modes
of investigation other than those beginning from within. This is as true of established
sociology as of a sociology developing inquiry from women's standpoint. Established
sociology has powerful ways of writing the social into the text, which produce society as
seen from an Archimedean point. A sociology for women says: "You can't have that
wish." There is no other way than beginning from the actual social relations in which we
are participants. This fact can be concealed, but not avoided.

Therefore I'm in general agreement with Collins, who suggests that "assuming the
language of dominant discourses, even using the language of objectified knowledge to
critique its terms, weds the thinker to the relations of ruling supported by objectified
knowledge." Yet my proposed critique is not just in language—one set of terms against
another—but in an inquiry disciplined by its commitment to explore how things actually
work, including language not as terms but as actual practice. Such inquiry explores
"dominant discourses" and discovers, among other matters, how we may be implicated in
those discourses. A sociology from the standpoint of women insists that there is no place
outside; hence it must be an insider's sociology. It may be Connell's failure to grasp my
insistence on critique through inquiry which allows him to draw the odd conclusion that
I make feminism as such "the principle of anarchy" outside and opposed to the patriarchal
power structure. In the sense I mean "insider," there are no outsiders. We are all partici-
pants. We discover ourselves in exploring the relations in which we participate and that
shape how we participate. The project locates itself in a dialectic between actual people

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[2] Of course sociological maps could not be as representationally simple as subway system maps, though indeed
the latter are highly artful and indeed are interesting and sophisticated as translators of properties of local spatial
and social organizational relations to a visual text. It is also important epistemologically to recognize that quite
different maps or diagrams could be produced to represent the same actuality. A diagram of the subway's
electrical system would be quite different.

located just as we are and social relations, in which we participate and to which we contribute, that have come to take on an existence and a power over against us.

THE POLITICS AND THE PRODUCT

Connell makes a major and, in my view, unjustified shift from the feminist sociology I'm putting forward to a vaguely defined "oppositional mode of doing sociology." It is indeed true that my feminism is generally oppositional, but I'd have got nowhere if I'd stuck with the radical tradition of European sociology, as Connell suggests, which for the most part is embedded as deeply in the male-dominated standpoints of ruling as is American sociology.

Much of my earlier work as a feminist sociologist was in critical dialogue with the deeply masculine values of the Marxism that pervaded the activism of the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s. My critique of the ideological practice of sociology (Smith 1990a) is equally applicable to the thinking of the Marxist theorizing of that period and earlier. In fact, an original and much earlier version was directed primarily towards the Marxist thinking of that time. I came to see that the oppositional stance of Marxism did not preclude adopting a standpoint in the relations of ruling. Relevant here is the poststructuralist insight that the language and concepts of a discourse always speak more and other than our intentions. Though I address this effect quite differently, preserving an ontology of the actual and proposing to explore discourse as actual ongoing textually mediated relations among actual people, the point is the same. Marxists might have an oppositional intention, but in taking up modes of thinking, reasoning, inquiry, and explanation within the established discourses of social science, humanities, and philosophy, they have imported into their oppositional work a standpoint or standpoints within the relations of ruling. The thoroughly masculinist stance consolidated this approach. Whatever their intentions, the organization of the discourse drew the Marxists into relations that contradicted what they sought, perhaps even to the point of locating them in class relations on the side opposite that to which they claimed allegiance.

I do not suggest for one moment that Marxists were dishonest—only that they did not have methods of analysis, or perhaps a standpoint, from which such contradictions might become visible. Characteristically, the working class was other and object (analyses of women were always of their place in the working class). Characteristically, drawing on Lenin and Lukacs, Marxists viewed the working class as the political constituency of revolution, to be led by an "oppositional" intelligentsia. Characteristically, Althusser's theorizing empowered a "scientific" intelligentsia and, in a new day, recreated an ideology enabling a revolutionary intelligentsia to represent itself as the proper leaders of its constituency, the working class. Characteristically, the Marxist-Leninist organizations—at least those I was familiar with in Canada and the United States—were led by university-educated and mostly middle-class male members of the intelligentsia, while middle-class women and working-class women and men played various subordinate roles. When the feminist critique finally was launched internally, it precipitated the collapse of the movement in Canada.

Oppositional modes of doing sociology do not of themselves entail a shift of standpoint from the ruling relations. These relations are built into methods of thinking, reasoning, and inquiry that have been powerfully influential in Europe as well as in North America, and have invaded oppositional thinking, rather like a computer virus, on these two continents.

Opposition as such is not what I'm doing. Nor am I convinced, as Collins is, that knowledge as such can be transformative. She sees my work as failing when measured

against her own objective, and indeed against her achievement (in *Black Feminist Thought* [1990]), of a transformed knowledge. Perhaps relations of dominance, such as those of white over nonwhite or of men over women, can be transformed through knowing them. The unyoking of black women's subjugated knowledge that has been Pat Hill Collins's own enterprise is surely empowering, but when we turn to the practice of change, how shall we proceed? Collins is concerned to transform the consciousness of the oppressed. My concern is with what we confront in transforming oppressive relations.

I've never seen resistance or opposition as beginning in theory, much less in sociology. Rather I've thought of "revolution" and organization for change as needing a division of labor in which the production of knowledge plays an essential, though not a leading, part. But the social organization of such knowledge must not reclaim the enterprise for the established relations of ruling. I want a sociology capable of exploring and mapping actual organization and relations that are invisible but *active* in the everyday/everynight sites where people take up resistance and struggle, capable of producing a knowledge that extends and expands their and our grasp of how things are put together and hence their and our ability to organize and act effectively.

Universities and colleges already are political; teaching in the social sciences and the humanities is a practical politics. Teaching the canon is patriarchal activism. I take this fact seriously. Of course I want a sociology for women to provide useful research services to organizations working for women's issues, but I want more as well.

I take the view that when we employ standard sociological methods of work, we inadvertently realign the issues that concern us with those of the relations of ruling. I want to build a sociology that opens up the social relations and forms of organization shaping our lives from the standpoint of women. You cannot get there directly from the kinds of applied participatory research that Connell recommends for me, though such a sociology would serve participatory research well. The long exclusion of women's knowledge and thought from universities and schools makes me very wary of proposals that would confine the focus of a sociology for women to immediate practical issues. Yes, I presuppose an "agentic professional," but I want her to be able to work very differently than she is able to with established sociological strategies of thinking and inquiry. I want her to know methods of inquiry beginning from a standpoint outside the relations of ruling and to be able to call on a sociological knowledge put together the same way.

Far from representing the limitations of the method of inquiry I propose, as Connell seems to suggest, my micro analyses of ideology open up the ways in which we social scientists participate as subjects in the orders of ruling. The latter aren't just literary matters or demonstrations of how the schemata of psychiatry generate accounts. An example is Adele Mueller's (1987) investigation showing how research on peasant women in the Third World, done by feminist researchers and theorized in the "women and development" discourse of the United States, is tied into the latter's development policies. The ideological organization I examined at the micro level in *The Conceptual Practices of Power* is shown to operate in the organization of relations of state, researchers, and the local realities of Third World woman. Gillian Walker (1990) also investigates ideological organization at the institutional level. She explores the process through which the concept of "family violence" was established as the conceptual organizer of state administrative and welfare practice, of the work of professionals, of the research and theoretical discourses concerned, and of the work of "transition houses."

This doesn't mean merely exploring relations in which intellectuals are active. The text-mediated relations of ruling are indeed pervasive. Alison Griffith and I (Griffith and Smith 1987), in the course of an inquiry into the work that mothers do in relation to their children's schooling, came to recognize in our own lives as single parents and in our talk

with other mothers the pervasive organizing effect of a mothering discourse that was founded in North America in the 1920s and 1930s. I've written too about "femininity" as a text-mediated discourse in which women participate actively (Smith 1990b).

My research concern is to build an ordinary good knowledge of the text-mediated organization of power from the standpoint of women in contemporary capitalism. Not for one moment do I suggest that this is all there is to be done or indeed all that this method of inquiry makes possible, but it is powerfully relevant to making change in our kind of society. Work produced from this approach has been relevant and has been used in a variety of contexts of struggle for change, including collective bargaining, issues of racial inequality in Canada, pay and employment equity, environmental activism, social policy, and gay activism—very much the kind of knowledge that Australian "femocrats" would find useful in their bridging of the gap between women's experience outside the bureaucracy and their efforts to make change from within. Studies exploring specific contexts build a more general knowledge of how the ruling relations are put together and how to investigate them. Of special importance is an increasing knowledge of how textuality operates in the organization of power and of how concepts and ideology enter directly into the organization of ruling, replicating organizational controls across multiple sites.

People working from this approach have investigated the text-based organization of nursing and how it articulates the work of nurses on the ward with the new systems of financial accounting in health care (Campbell 1984); how public service systems of job descriptions organize gender-differentiated career lines (Cassin forthcoming; Reimer 1988); how the process of planning legislation and the operations of planning departments at municipal levels work to defeat local activists' opposition to development even when the activists win (Turner 1991); how government policies involving changing funding practices transform the accounting practices of community colleges and hence their internal systems of control over and use of teaching staff (McCoy 1991); how to reorganize the availability of treatment for people with AIDS and who are HIV-positive so as to make "possible" clinical knowledge widely available (G. Smith 1990); the ideology of the "single parent" as organizer of multiple sites (parent-teacher contact, classroom, administration, newspaper features) in education (Griffith 1986); and the formation and practice of social work consciousness as an agent of ruling (De Montigny 1989). I have mentioned other issues earlier.

It is also possible to deploy this method of inquiry on topics other than the text-based relations of ruling, as demonstrated by Himani Bannerji's (1988) brilliant study of late nineteenth-century Bengali theater in the formation of ruling-class consciousness in colonial Bengal; by Ann Manicom's (1988) marvelous investigation of how teachers' work is shaped by the economic status of the homes of the children they teach; and by George Smith's (1991) investigation of the experience of gay students in high school, which explores through that experience the distinctive social organization of their oppression.[3]

Fragmentary as these studies may seem, they teach us more and more about the complex and interwoven organization of the relations of ruling, and more and more about how institutional processes are coordinated and "run." Directly or indirectly, most of this work provides a knowledge of the processes and relations of ruling that at least some collectivities have found invaluable. And after all, there is a politics of inquiry that goes beyond direct service to organized struggles. We teach, and teaching sociology, as Sally Hacker (1990: 158) once told me, is essentially a political act, both in substance and in classroom practice.

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[3] A fuller list is available on request.

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