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First published 1998

Published in association with *Theory, Culture & Society*, Nottingham Trent University

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SAGE Publications Ltd
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU

SAGE Publications Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
32, M-Block Market
Greater Kailash – I
New Delhi 110 048

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 7619 5529 1
ISBN 0 7619 5530 5 (pbk)

Library of Congress catalog card number 98-060406

Typeset by Type Study, Scarborough, North Yorkshire
Printed in Great Britain by The Cromwell Press, Trowbridge, Wiltshire

CONTENTS

Notes on Contributors vii
Preface ix

1 Bakhtin and the Human Sciences: A Brief Introduction
Michael Gardiner and Michael Mayerfeld Bell 1

PART I DIALOGICS

2 A Bakhtinian Psychology: From Out of the Heads of Individuals and into the Dialogues between Them
John Shotter and Michael Billig 13
3 The Dialogics of Narrative Identity
Jennifer de Peuter 30
4 Culture as Dialogue
Michael Mayerfeld Bell 49
5 Bakhtin and the Dialogic of Sociology: An Investigation
Dorothy E. Smith 63

PART II CARNIVALS

6 The Grotesque of the Body Electric
Peter Hitchcock 78
7 Bakhtin's Dialogical Body Politics
Hwa Yol Jung 95
8 Knowing the Subaltern: Bakhtin, Carnival, and the Other Voice of the Human Sciences
Michael Bernard-Donals 112

PART III CONVERSATIONS

9 'The Incomparable Monster of Solipsism': Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty
Michael Gardiner 128
10 Bakhtin and Mannheim: An Introductory Dialogue
Raymond A. Morrow 145
11 The Death and Rebirth of the Author: The Bakhtin Circle and Bourdieu on Individuality, Language and Revolution
Ian Burkitt 163

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4

CULTURE AS DIALOGUE

Michael Mayerfeld Bell

What is culture? This is a question we have answered many ways. Culture is 'the total way of life of a people'; the 'webs of significance' we ourselves spin; 'an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong'; a 'toolkit' of practices, stocked with 'the publicly available symbolic forms through which people express and experience meaning'; a 'perspective', a 'standpoint', an 'interpretive community'. Ways, webs, texts, practices, toolkits, perspectives, standpoints, and communities: Powerful metaphors all.[1] Or, to go back further, culture is *culture* – that which we create out of nature – the metaphor upon which the others comment, the unmoved metaphor at the end of the line.[2]

I would like to suggest another metaphor for this metaphor, not as a replacement for these others but as another comment on the original, as well as a comment on the other comments. My point is not to argue that I have solved the problem of culture and have hit upon the perfect description of what it is, a description capable of sinking all other contenders, triumphantly blowing them out of the waters of theory. As will become apparent, such a militaristic conception of scholarship would be appallingly contradictory, not just to what scholarship ought to be but also to the argument about culture I want to make. Moreover, no metaphor represents experience perfectly; all metaphors are stretched. Culture is ways, webs, texts, practices, toolkits, perspectives . . . is it really? Perhaps a melting-pot, a salad bowl, a landscape, a technology . . . perhaps. The only perfect representation of a thing is the thing itself, which is no representation at all. Although metaphors never capture experience perfectly, we would have no way to relate and to reflect without them.[3] Relation and reflection require representation, and probably the best solution to the necessary distortion that this involves is to have many ways of representing the same experience, many metaphors or understanding it, comments upon comments upon comments.

In this spirit of commentary I make the central comment of this chapter: that it is also useful to consider culture as dialogue.

The metaphor of dialogue is broadly applicable to the question of culture, I believe. Or should I say the *questioning* of culture – and the possibility of studying it – which is so current today. There are the objectivist critiques. Is culture a thing, stable, isolatable, describable, categorizable, a social force?

Can anyone, in their straining, ever catch more than a glimpse of the Other's text, a text which the Other never displays all of and constantly changes besides? And if it isn't a thing, how can (and why should) a social science study it? Then there are the subjectivist critiques. Can the study of culture ever be anything more than the culture of study, one more interested perspective peering out from its fortress of tradition and prison of institutions? Isn't it rude – or worse – to read over someone's shoulder, moreover to interpret and to critique, and thus necessarily to judge, what it is that one sees there? What right, therefore, do we who study culture professionally, we cultural experts, have to say and write what we do – and get paid for it?

These are the by-now familiar, polarizing, and perhaps tedious contemporary contentions with culture. Anthropologists in recent years have been wallowing in the subjectivist contentions, leading to a genre of work which David Chioni Moore (1994: 354) recently termed 'anthro-apology'. Sociologists, with their greater investment in a self-conception of themselves as practitioners of positive science, have tended to respond to such relativisms with more impatience and less hand-wringing. ('When I hear the word relativism I reach for my . . .' Parsons? Weber? Marx?) Yet there has also developed of late a literature of socio-apology (for example, see Kleinman, 1993; Lofland, 1993; Snow and Morrill, 1993), a genre to which I, as a cultural sociologist, may be contributing now.

But I hope not. In the pages to come, I offer what I believe to be affirmative responses to these questions through a dialogic conception of culture. I sketch out three implications of this metaphor: first, for understanding cultural change; secondly, for understanding resistance to cultural change; and thirdly, for understanding the culture of study in which we study culture. I claim no special originality in doing so. A vigorous scholarly dialogue on dialogue has sprung up of late, and my thoughts have developed in interaction with the works of many, among them Martin Buber (1970 [1922]), Jürgen Habermas (1984, 1991), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Don Levine (1995), but most especially Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986, 1993) – an ongoing seminar whose participants have gathered from across the boundaries of literary theory, feminism, psychology, sociology, critical theory, and more. I make my arguments with their help, sometimes explicit, often implicit. And if my arguments do not settle these questions (as I very much suspect will be the case) I will not be dismayed, nor even displeased – as long as I have offered something worth talking about.

Dialogue and Cultural Change

Struggle as we might with our theories, it is very hard to avoid a conception of culture that treats it as, at least to some degree, a thing. Part of this reification is political. As a cultural sociologist, for example, one is committed to making the case that culture has some sociological consequence, that it is worthy of the attention of sociology – sociology as a way of looking at the world and as the profession in which one works. Culture therefore has to *be* something and to *do* something, something significant. But it is also an intellectual matter: we are seeking concepts to describe experience, and concepts must be of something. This something may not have existed before the concept, as social constructionism has taught us about trees falling in forests – at least it does not exist for *us*. Yet this something, once conceptualized, is nevertheless now some thing: a matter of interest. It is and therefore it does, for everything that is does something, if only take up conceptual space.

Reification, however, presents an immediate tension over the question of change. In order for something to be, it must have some kind of identifiable permanence and stability. This stability in turn makes it possible to identify a particular thing as a source of doing, as a teleological force initiating movement or resisting it, in good Newtonian fashion. How could we regard something as a force if the thing, and thus the force, were constantly changing? Thus, in order to say that culture is and does something, we find epistemological (and probably institutional) attractions in arguing for some kind of stability in it, leading to a degree of hammer-and-nails reification.

But say that we note that, as the hammer of culture comes down, it turns into a plumber's wrench before it strikes the nail's head. (The stuff we label 'culture' is, after all, often changing.) It would be hard to argue in such a case that the cultural hammer drove the nail, for it was no longer a hammer by the time it actually struck the nail's head. (An additional complexity would be if in the meantime the nail turned into a screw.) One common conceptual solution is to argue that the stable cause that drove the nail was neither the hammer nor the wrench, but rather whatever it was on the outside that did the swinging or created the occasion for it – the economy, say – turning culture into, at most, the kind of unstable epiphenomenon that many sociologists of culture, among others, have struggled to prevent it from becoming.

If we are to regard culture as significant, many cultural theorists have recognized, we ought to have more than an epiphenomenal argument. A favourite theoretical tactic is to find some way to lump the hammer and the wrench into the same category so that what appeared to be change in fact was not, or at least not much, such as Max Weber (1958 [1904–5]) ingeniously did almost a century ago in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. (In this wise and still hotly contested book, Weber suggests that the capitalist spirit of hard work and accumulation derives to a large degree from early Protestant asceticism.) After all, both a big hammer (the Protestant ethic) and a big wrench (the spirit of capitalism) can drive a nail (and probably, if you hit it hard enough, a screw as well). It is still the same basic 'strategy of action', as the practice view of culture would describe it.

Strong arguments for the significance of culture can be made with such an approach, emphasizing culture's stable influence across a period of change. But we should also consider the possibility that cultural *change* makes a teleological contribution to the dynamics of social life. It seems to me that we have been so worried about establishing culture as a thing, a matter worthy of scholarly attention, that we have emphasized its stability, its dull compulsions, over its social creativity. This emphasis may, among other things, lead us back to the epiphenomenal dilemma. Without an account of culture's creativity, we are left with no understanding of culture's origin, except as a response to that which is external to culture – which runs the serious risk of reducing culture to an epiphenomenon again, albeit an epiphenomenon with a bit of inertial Weberesque lag.

Take the practice view for culture, which I mention above, a valuable metaphor that many (myself included) have used. In her renowned article introducing the closely related 'toolkit' metaphor, Ann Swidler makes the case for culture's significance through its stability, not its dynamism – through the way culture as tradition and common sense 'provides a repertoire of capacities' for 'strategies of action' during 'settled' periods of social life, and through the way culture as ideology shapes 'new habits of action' during 'unsettled' periods, until these too become tradition and common sense (Swidler, 1986: 279, 284). Change is either external to culture or unexplained. Swidler offers no account of what unsettles social life (could it be culture itself sometimes?), just the observation that life often is that way (as it certainly is), and suggests that 'ultimately, structural and historical opportunities determine' which of the new habits of action that somehow emerge 'succeed' – the epiphenomenal lag (Swidler, 1986: 284). Pierre Bourdieu's vision of culture as practice also externalizes cultural change. The *habitus*, the 'system of dispositions' which Bourdieu (1977 [1972], 1984) usefully suggests forms in response to our life experiences, primarily our early ones, gains its shape from the forces that pattern those experiences, primarily class – not from the *habitus's* own creativity. Berger (1995) presents a view of culture that runs along similar epiphenomenal lines (although Berger is more explicit about his epiphenomenal views).

Regarding culture as dialogue, however, can make the *creativity* of culture a topic for social analysis, at the same time as acknowledging culture's regularities and responses to external change. *Culture, in this view, is the conversations we have and which we expect to have with various people in various places at various times; it is also the conversations we have which we did not expect with these various people in these various places at these various times.* This definition is another reification, of course, as indeed any definition must be, but one that I believe is more conscious of itself as a reification for it acknowledges both the conversations we have which we expect and the conversations we have which we do not expect as equally cultural phenomena. Seeing culture as dialogue, as having its own internal dialectic of conversation, also allows us to acknowledge its sometimes enchanting and sometimes upsetting, sometimes graceful and sometimes awkward, sometimes rapid and sometimes glacial spontaneity. It allows us sometimes to see culture as collective agency in the face of frequently bad odds.

Conversation is never completely predictable. Imagine that you and I are talking together. I do not know what words I am going to say to you before I say them, at least not exactly. And even if my lines are well-studied, my performance will vary in ways that I cannot predict, in large part because I cannot predict exactly what your reaction and your response will be. The same must be true of your performance, however well-studied it may have been, however well you may have tried, and felt necessary, to constrain it ahead of time. I, at least, find myself constantly surprised, elated, depressed, and yet nearly always stimulated in some direction, degree, and manner by conversation. But conversation – whether it be verbal, written, tactile, or imagined – is not random. It will indeed have constraints and regularities; some we will be conscious of and some likely we will not. One can usually guess reasonably well what kind of conversation there will be before it begins, and one strategy of action each of us have is to choose our conversations in ways we think helpful. We each seek out particular kinds of conversations with particular action concerns in mind. And our hope will be that some kind of change results, some kind of collective agency – that we will be and will do something different than was the case beforehand.

Difference is central to the conversations we expect and hope to have. The various people with whom we converse at various times and places are different people in different places and times. Our conversations are with, between, among, and probably always about difference, at the same time that notions of difference imply similarities within their boundaries. Cultural understanding, as many have noted, depends upon drawing boundaries, constructing categories and differences (Erikson, 1966; Nippert-Eng, 1996; Zerubavel, 1991). But it also depends upon transcending those boundaries, as Erikson and Nippert-Eng have observed, both in order to find out where the boundaries are to begin with and to find out if the time has come when it makes sense to change them. In conversation, we discover our boundaries and transcend them as we interact with difference – that is, with each other – in a collective act of dialogic improvisation.

A degree of sameness, and a commitment to it, is also central to our cultural conversations. A word, as Mikhail Bakhtin and V.N. Voloshinov put it, is 'territory shared' (Voloshinov [Bakhtin], 1986 [1929]: 86).[4] Although the speaker's meaning may not be the same as the hearer's, and so too for the hearer's response, the hearer will *take into account* an understanding, however flawed, of the speaker's meaning in formulating a response. Correspondingly, the speaker will choose his or her words in ways that take into account an understanding, however flawed, of what the hearer's meanings might be – if in fact there is a dialogue taking place, and not, as Bakhtin put it, a monologue. *Taking into account the words of others is the principal phenomenological requirement of dialogic interaction.*[5] In a conversation, we do not say just anything about anything. We negotiate, we discuss, we mistake, we mislead, and we otherwise stumble to a jointly creative response to the conditions of our understandings and misunderstandings.

Dialogue and Resistance to Cultural Change

Dialogue – conversations with difference, through sameness – seems to me a fair description of social experience. What we spend most of our lives doing is talking to each other, or imagining such conversations in our minds, our writings, our art, and our other works. We speak, we argue; we shout, we explain; we harangue, we advise; we chat, we (as Midwesterners say) visit; we inquire, we interrogate. We consult, confer, counsel, confabulate. We discuss, debate, deny, dispute. We laugh, we cry; we smile, we frown. We quiz, query, question. We criticize. The list of words we have to describe conversation, and what goes on during it, is, of course, enormous, which suggests to me something about the significance it must evidently have for us. No great insight here. My argument, though, is that we ought to acknowledge the significance of this interactive experience of difference and sameness in our theories of culture.

If we are having a dialogue, however, for often, it must be recognized, this is not the case – at least not much of a dialogue. A striking thing about the conversation of culture is how often we lose our interest in dialogue and close ourselves off to it. The *problem of monologue* – the problem of speaking without taking into account what others have to say – ought as well to be central to cultural analysis, for reasons both theoretical and, as I'll come to, moral. We need to account for the conditions that impede dialogue, and that thereby impede culture as dialogue.

Let me immediately be cautious, though, about over-stating what I, following Bakhtin in the main, mean by monologue, and by implication dialogue. There is no pure monologue (at least among the living): all statements have some raconteur, however imagined, in mind. In Bakhtin's words, 'The word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it: . . . every word is directed toward an *answer* and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates' (quoted in Morris, 1994: 76; original emphasis). Consequently, few speakers, if any, are completely impervious to the dialogic transcendence of their boundaries. As Bakhtin put it, in one of his most widely cited lines, 'There is neither a first word nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context . . .' (1986: 170).

In other words, actual talk necessarily has the characteristics of both dialogue and monologue, in varying degrees. (Let not the very categories for describing the conditions of dialogic transcendence be impervious themselves to that transcendence!) And in the ultimate inescapability of dialogue, I will suggest below, there is reason for some considerable cultural hope.

But although dialogue is ultimately inescapable, we often try to escape it, and with some success. Let us consider the conversational positions that favour attempts to create monologue. It seems to me that there are three conversational positions which, when carried to their dichotomous extremes, are equally capable of shutting down dialogue: *objectivism*, *subjectivism*, and what I will ungraciously call *subjectivo-objectivism*. By objectivism I mean when someone says that my statement is the final and unalterable truth, proved through science, god, philosophy, economics, or some other external firmament: the last word on the subject. I don't need to take into account what you say. By subjectivism I mean when someone says that I have my perspective – my standpoint, my bias, my experience – which is just as good and authentic as any other, so I don't have to listen to or take into account yours. Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, after all. By subjectivo-objectivism I mean a monologic position which draws on both subjectivism and objectivism.[6] I have in mind here the person who claims, based solely on personal experience, to know the last word on the topic. The personal experience of others is simply wrong. Such a position gains the authenticity of subjectivism in combination with the foundationalism of objectivism. Objectivism (through denying difference), subjectivism (by saying difference is all there is), and subjectivo-objectivism (by saying that difference doesn't matter) each make further dialogue – further conversation with difference, through sameness – difficult and unlikely.

Much of the gripe with positivist science, of course, has been its objectivism, the way it established claims for truth that were institutionally removed from where other claims could be heard, or, perhaps better put, where they seemed worth listening to – worth taking into account. Few, I imagine, fully support that Olympian vision of science anymore. It may well be that few ever really did. But in any event, the institutional arrangements and the topics of conversation – the social conditions of talk – have changed such that the objectivist position is now scarcely tenable among those listening to what social scientists have to say, and it is not uncommon today to hear mention of 'the death of objectivism' (for example, Moore, 1994: 354). Such a pronouncement seems premature, however, especially in light of the constant little objectivisms of common conversation which, in certain social conditions of talk, could well become – and it seems to me often do become, or contribute to – the kind of conversation-stopping objectivism that positivism once was.

But critiques of objectivism seem to flip into its opposite, or so we fear (as is often the case with absolutisms). The study of culture, we imagine it being said, is no more than the culture of study, one more biased position, one more manifestation of power-knowledge, one more interested standpoint in a world of self-interest, no more valid and authoritative than any other. All standpoints are relative, and their standards of validity are incommensurable. Science is in no position to judge other cultural perspectives, nor are any cultural perspectives in a position to judge any others. Consequently, there is nothing to talk about, except that we evidently have nothing to talk about.

But we are, in fact, generally wary of such dichotomies – postmodern critiques of modernism and modernist critiques of postmodernism to the contrary notwithstanding. Hardly anyone says such starkly polarized things and really means them (except, perhaps, in graduate social theory courses and other social conditions conducive to exploring the extremes of human thought).[7] Yet although rarely is anyone so subjectivist, or so objectivist, we often worry that someone might be.[8]

This is a good sign. It is a sign of our general commitment to dialogue, despite all our own personal forays into little objectivisms and little subjectivisms, and sometimes larger ones, and despite all our suspicions that others are currently making similar forays. We apparently want to talk to each other, as Jürgen Habermas and Martin Buber have argued.[9] But given the frequency of larger degrees of objectivism and subjectivism, we are apparently as well often scared of talking to each other.

And what are we afraid of? *Critique* – another word for the spontaneous creativity of culture's dialogic improvisation. It seems fairly obvious why: critique is powerful stuff, capable of recasting the social conditions of talk even as those social conditions shape what is talked about within culture.

A paradox of culture is that, although critique often frightens us, it is only through critique that our fears are ever truly relieved.

Dialogue and the Culture of Study

What does all this suggest about how those who study culture should go about their business? My recommendation is that we see research itself as dialogue, as a public conversation with difference, through sameness – a conversation that is neither objectivist nor subjectivist (nor subjectivo-objectivist) but instead is dedicated to keeping the public conversation going by avoiding these tendencies for monologue. Let us study dialogue with dialogue. We need to drop our objectivist pretenses, though, if we have not done so already. The study of culture does indeed have its own culture of study. But admitting this does not necessarily plunge us into subjectivism. Instead, it provides an opportunity to widen our conversation with others, increasing the dialogue of knowledge, and thus avoiding subjectivism as well as objectivism.

The lack of a clear line between the culture we study and the culture in which we study is part of what makes the study of culture both theoretically and morally possible. There is a sameness here, through which we may come to talk about difference. But to say that all is difference, and that there is little possibility of, or right to, interchange with the culture of the Other, is to commit quite a large subjectivism, closing off the conversation we apparently often, and I believe rightly, want. Sociologists, anthropologists, historians, humanists, and others who study culture should not be rude about it, or authoritarian; we should not force people to participate in conversations they do not want to participate in. For one thing, if we do force them, chances are we really will do little better than to glimpse their texts – to glimpse what James Scott (1990) has called 'hidden transcripts' – little better than to hear forced conversation. My bet (if Jürgen Habermas (1984) and Martin Buber (1970 [1922]) are right) is that, given the opportunity, people will want to participate in the dialogue of culture, that they will want to talk to others, including scholars.[10] The critical interchange (what Anthony Giddens (1984) has called the 'double hermeneutic') that results will lead to a more informed study of culture, and thus a more informed culture.

Fredrik Barth puts it well:

> I am urging that we should not seek a fictitious cultural authority in others – we should engage them in an *interchange of knowledge and judgment*. That also means being willing to critique the validity, instrumentality, and morality of their ideas and actions and to being thus criticized ourselves. Our relativism should be located in the humility to learn and to engage within the contexts of knowledge and practice that frame our interaction with people – not in bracketing the other's ideas and behavior to remove them from moral, rational, and human judgment, thereby undermining the honesty of our engagement with them. (Barth, 1995: 67; added emphasis)[11]

The question becomes, then, how do we as scholars of culture conduct ourselves in a way that allows that interchange of knowledge and judgement to flourish in the least monologic way possible – how do we conduct ourselves in a way that allows mutual critique to flourish? In closing, I'll suggest a few guidelines for such flourishing.

Charles Darwin, I once read somewhere, suggested that science is different from everyday manners of thought in only one regard: science is done with more care. Now, I am not trying to add the flag of science to my cause here. Nor am I trying to burn it for my cause. The fight over possession and dispossession of this heavily laden word is one I will avoid. But I do believe that this idea of case may be helpful to the conception of research as dialogue I am advocating for the study of culture. What is distinctive about the study of culture is not its method: we study culture with culture, dialogue with dialogue. Rather, what is distinctive – in part, as I'll come to – is the care with which research is carried out, a care that, as professionals, some are paid to undertake. We professional scholars of culture therefore have time to talk through these things more than most other people do.

And if we are to study dialogue with dialogue, we must also commit ourselves to taking into account what others have to say. Let us be open, although not in an uncritical way, to their words. Call it consideration; it is considerate to consider what others have to say, as well as better scholarship. Recognizing that the basic intellectual methods of the study of culture are the same as that of culture itself is a good place to begin, for such a recognition invites others to listen and respond to the dialogue of scholarship, as well as inviting scholars to listen and respond to others. Participatory methods of research, such as those currently being worked out among extension sociologists at land grant universities and among others engaged in sociological practice, hold much potential for increasing the openness of scholarly dialogue (see, for example, Collins, 1986; Gaventa, 1993; Park et al., 1993; Stoecker and Bonacich, 1992). When farmers, dancers, street vendors, rap musicians, school teachers, and steel workers begin appearing regularly as co-authors, and perhaps even authors, in scholarly journals, and when our writings become more accessible and attentive to the concerns of these potential participants in our dialogue, these will be signs that the invitation to listen and respond has been sincere.

We need as well, it goes nearly without saying, to maintain the traditional commitment to honesty and responsibility in research if our scholarly conversations are to appeal to others, although I think we could be more straightforward about our politics than we have generally been in the past.

These, then, are five of the guidelines I would recommend for the flourishing of dialogue in research. The participants in this dialogue need to speak with care, consideration, honesty, straightforwardness, and a sense of responsibility (another form of speaking with care). Perhaps the most important reason to do so is because, when we speak in this way, we open up the conversational space for a sixth feature of dialogic talk: the collective agency represented by dialogic criticism – criticism that is careful, considerate, honest, straightforward, and responsible, and thus more likely to be seriously engaged rather than walled off through monologue.[12]

Who knows? The dialogic improvisation that results may help bring culture closer to research, and research closer to culture, as each takes the other into account. At least it seems to me to be worth trying. Indeed, I imagine most of those who participate in our studies would say this is the reason why the study of culture is worth trying in the first place.

I do not offer these guidelines as original or unusual thoughts. They seem to me part of the common culture of dialogue – the social conditions of dialogue – as opposed to the monologic cultures of objectivism, subjectivism, and subjectivo-objectivism. Indeed, I would be tempted to call these dialogic guidelines banal except for one stunning feature of them: the common disregard for the social conditions of dialogue within the community of scholarship. Care, consideration, honesty, straightforwardness, responsibility – few scholars would disagree with such homey ideals, I imagine. But where is the dialogue? Where is the participation? Why are most professional scholarly works as yet so uninviting – uninviting in tone, language, and sometimes even topic – even to other professional scholars, let alone potential lay scholars? Why are there so few serious efforts to involve those without PhDs as authors and co-authors, readers and co-readers (by which I mean people with whom we discuss what we read), in our books and journals? Why do we professional scholars regularly find ourselves a bit embarrassed when our neighbours and friends ask us about our work, unable to explain it in ways that are understandable and yet serious enough to warrant the salary and prestige we receive for doing it?

Perhaps it is because we have for so long constructed our scholarly institutions on more monologic grounds – on the belief that subjectivism (and subjectivo-objectivism) must be neutralized through objectivism – that we have not yet been able to confront fully these questions. We know now, however, that monologue in all its forms is, in the end, both impossible (as Bakhtin, among others, has helped make clear) and immoral (as Bakhtin, among others, has also helped make clear, and as we all generally believe, or so I gather from the ordinariness of the dialogic guidelines I suggest above).[13] And yet we continue to study dialogue with monologue, and thereby encourage the solidification of cultural discussion into the hardened atomic lumps of subject and object, laity and academy, local and expert, those who are spoken of and those who speak. This is all so clearly unnecessary, unwanted, and unpleasant.

So let's be done with it. In abandoning the objectivist's need to establish the study of culture as a different way of knowing, as different practices of knowledge, we need not fear that scholarship dissolves into the chaotic sea of mere opinion (and that professional cultural scholars will therefore all lose their jobs). Scholarship is opinion, of course, and its ways of knowing are not extraordinary, but it is nevertheless a distinctive kind of opinion, formed in a distinctive culture, a distinctive kind of conversation. The study of culture takes place within a culture of study. And what ought to be the prominent feature of the culture of study in which we study culture is the high degree of our commitment to creating the social conditions of dialogic talk.

The goal of a dialogic conception of culture is not mere discourse or conversational analysis (although it by no means rejects these methods of studying culture). What I am really talking about here is democracy.[14] A dialogical approach has, if nothing else, the not inconsiderable side-benefit of promoting what I believe to be the basic moral mission of cultural research: building the social conditions of a more democratic culture.

I hope, at least, that I have helped promote these conditions here. And I also hope that what I have said is not the last word on the subject. Rather, I hope what I have offered is the *next word*. The study of culture should aspire to nothing more, and to nothing less.

May the seminar never end!

Notes

This chapter about dialogue is as well the product of dialogue. I thank Laura Bell, Joshua Bell, Mitch Duneier, Mustafa Emirbayer, Sue Jarnagin, Diane Mayerfeld, Ernie Mayerfeld, Alan Rudy, Joan Weston, the staff at the Centre for Rural Economy of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, and the students in my Fall 1995 Qualitative Methods and Spring 1996 Contemporary Sociological Theory classes for their contributions to whatever collective agency this chapter may represent. I dedicate this chapter to the memory of my friend Iverson Griffin, a great sociologist and a great conversationalist.

1 I quote, in succession, Kluckhohn (as cited in Geertz, 1973a: 4), Geertz (1973a: 5, claiming the mantle of Weber), Geertz (1973b: 452, claiming his own mantle this time), Swidler (1986: 273), and any of a variety of contemporary writers.

2 See Williams (1976) for the best overview of the origins of that most complex of cultural terms: 'culture' itself.

3 For enlightening discussions of the necessity of metaphor, see Lakoff (1987), Lakoff and Johnson (1980), and Johnson (1987).

4 This work is attributed by some to Bakhtin, but seems to me to be itself territory shared, the product of dialogue between Bakhtin, Voloshinov, and others in their intellectual circle in

the St Petersburg of the 1920s. For a review of the debate over the attribution of these works, see Dentith (1995).

5 Students of social theory will hear in here, correctly, echoes of – a taking into account of – Mead's idea of role-taking. Taking into account, however, is broader and more open to the possibility of our critical understanding of the other. Although we take the other's role in taking into account their words, we do not necessarily completely agree with those words or share in the projects which motivated them. Taking into account does not necessarily lead to the formation and solidification of a generalized other; there is a possibility for critique, the topic of the next section.

6 I thank my colleague Sue Jarnigan for pointing out this third monologic position and how very common it is.

7 The journal *Social Text* may be one such condition, as the Sokol affair suggests. But then, Sokol himself did not really mean what he wrote, as he himself has explained (Sokol, 1996).

8 Indeed, this is why Sokol's *Social Text* article generated such interest and controversy.

9 Habermas and Buber make closely related arguments from which I am borrowing liberally here. Habermas suggests that in addition to our instrumental interests, what Habermas (1984) terms 'action oriented toward success', we also have an interest in communicating with each other, what Habermas terms 'communicative action'. Buber (1970 [1922]) similarly distinguishes between 'I-it' attitudes and 'I-Thou' attitudes, arguing that humans have both objectifying tendencies in their relations with others as well as an 'instinct for communion' – pretty much the same point, albeit more essentialized by the term 'instinct' than sociologists typically feel comfortable with. Despite this essentialism, I find myself closer to Buber. Habermas's communicative action is in part an instrumentality oriented towards success; thus, it seems to me that communicative action and instrumental action cannot be separated in the way he suggests. My point is not all is interest; otherwise life would be a tautology. I argue elsewhere (Bell, 1998) for an interactive distinction between 'interests' and 'sentiments'. Communicative action pertains to our instrumental actions oriented towards both. Buber reserves the term dialogue for only what goes on in 'I-Thou' relations, making dialogue more or less synonymous with the 'I-Thou', but nevertheless an instrumentality – and yet not an objectivism, not an 'I-it'. I depart from Buber in arguing for the equally problematic status of subjectivism, what might be called, in Buber's terms, 'I-me' attitudes, and subjectivo-objectivism – 'I-me-it' attitudes.

10 See my discussion of Habermas and Buber in note 9.

11 Barth offers this dialogic thought as part of his argument for recognizing '*knowledge* as a major modality of culture' (1995: 66; original emphasis). My closely related focus is on the *interchange* of knowledge and judgement that Barth himself discusses, albeit more briefly.

12 I depart here from Habermas's model of the 'ideal speech situation' in that dialogue makes no requirement for setting aside interests or power relations. Rather, the central purpose of dialogic critique is to discuss our interests and power relations, and to engage us all in the project of democratic conversation, as I indicate below. Habermas's model seems paradoxically to propose the hypothetical overcoming of the necessity for democratic conversation in the creation of the very conditions that make it possible. A dialogic conception of critique suggests that, with difficulty and with commitment and with time, we can talk *about* power *across* power.

13 In this regard, also see Gardiner (1996) and Nielsen (this volume).

14 I thank Alan Rudy for pointing this out to me, and I thank Joan Weston for asking the question that led to this observation.

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5

BAKHTIN AND THE DIALOGIC OF SOCIOLOGY: AN INVESTIGATION

Dorothy E. Smith

If we begin as ourselves, active in the local settings of our living, we know sociology as we live it as its readers, writers, speakers and hearers. We are in the middle of it, in our reading in a library, in an office, at home. Our reading is active, responsive, attentive to possible uses, reactive to what we identify as error, anger sometimes, pleasure sometimes. It is also part of a course of action projecting into what comes next, teaching, writing, speaking at a conference. Writing social science, too, engages actively with the discourse; it references and is in dialogue with our reading. Explicit references are only a small part of it; it is deeply embedded in, and draws on, language uses as they come to hand already determined historically by their uses in multiple disciplinary sites. And beyond a particular discipline. For, of course, a social scientific language isn't clean. It is contaminated in multiple ways by its dialogue with the heteroglossia of the society. Sociology, for example, the discipline I know best, pulls language in to do its discursive work, language that trails with it a debris of meaning from its original site. Reciprocally, the language of sociological discourse goes out into the world and is taken over to do work other than the sociological discursive.

This chapter draws on Mikhail M. Bakhtin's theory of the novel, of language, and of speech genres to investigate discourse as social organization. It takes up this project as an investigation into sociology as a discourse because I know this discourse as an 'insider'; I am a participant; I know it as a local practice in my own life (and it is this that provides the main resource for this investigation). In this I move away from Foucault's (1972) conception of discourse, displacing the traditional 'unities' of the history of thought and substituting a conception of a field 'made up of the totality of all effective statements (whether spoken or written), in their dispersion as events and in the occurrence that is proper to them' (Foucault, 1972: 27). Brilliant as it is, it accredits the stasis of the text. Here, by contrast, I want to explore discourse as local practices in which people are active. In a sense, I want to lift the discourse off the page and pull it into life; I want to step outside the artifice of the text's stasis and rediscover discourse as a local organization of consciousness, as part of life.

In this I am helped by Bakhtin's differentiation between utterances in and