

## DOROTHY E. SMITH

### A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Dorothy E. Smith explains that her sociological theory derives from her life experiences as a woman, particularly as a woman moving between two worlds—the male-dominated academic sphere and the female-centered life of the single parent. Remembering herself at Berkeley in the early 1960s studying for a doctorate in sociology while single-parenting, Smith reflects that her life seems to have been framed by what she sees as “not so much . . . a career as a series of contingencies, of accidents” (1979:151). This theme of contingency is one of many personal experiences that have led Smith to challenge sociological orthodoxy such as the image of the purposive actor engaged in linear pursuits of projects.

Whether they occurred by accident or design, the following events appear to the outsider as significant stages in Smith’s development. She was born into a multigenerational family of independent and activist women in 1926 in Great Britain (Smythe, 2009); she earned her bachelor’s degree in sociology from the University of London in 1955 and her PhD in sociology from the University of California, Berkeley in 1963. During this period, she had “the experience of marriage, of immigration [to Canada] closely following marriage, of the arrival of children, of the departure of a husband rather early one morning, of the jobs that became available” (D. Smith, 1979:151). Of these events, Smith stresses, they “were moments in which I had in fact little choice and certainly little foreknowledge.” The jobs that became available included research sociologist at Berkeley; lecturer in sociology at Berkeley; lecturer in sociology at the University of Essex, Colchester, England; associate professor and then professor in the department of sociology at the University of British Columbia; and professor of sociology in education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto.

Smith has written on a wide variety of topics, all connected by a concern with “bifurcation,” sometimes as a central theme and sometimes as a motif. Smith sees the experience of bifurcation manifesting itself in the separation between social-scientific description and people’s lived experience, between women’s lived experience and the patriarchal ideal types they are given for describing that experience, between the micro-world and the macro-world structures that dictate micro experience, and, especially, between the micro world of the oppressed and the micro world of the dominants whose actions create the macro structures of oppression. The concretization of these themes can be seen in a selective review of the titles of some of Smith’s works. In 1987, Smith produced her most extensive and integrated treatment of these themes in what has become a landmark in feminist sociology, *The Everyday World as Problematic* (1987). She followed this with *The Conceptual Practices of Power* (1990a), *Texts, Facts and Femininity* (1990b), *Writing the Social* (1999b), and *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People* (2004b).

What Smith is producing for feminist sociologists, and indeed for all sociologists interested in the theoretical frontiers of the profession, is a sociology that integrates neo-Marxian concerns with the structures of domination and phenomenological insights into the variety of subjective and microinteractional worlds. Smith sees these various everyday life-worlds as shaped by macro structures that are themselves shaped by the historical specifics of economic demand. What Smith wishes to avoid, in developing this line of reasoning, is a vision of the world in which the oppressors are consistently interpreted as individual actors making

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