"Political Activist as Ethnographer" Revisited[1]

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Abstract: In this article I revisit and expand upon George Smith's (1990) landmark article, "Political Activist as Ethnographer." Political activist ethnography (PAE) is a specialized form of institutional ethnography (IE) that has not received nearly enough attention in the twenty years since the original publication of Smith's article. In an effort to revisit and bolster this research approach, I provide an overview of IE/PAE, critically engage with three recent commentaries on PAE, and offer a new interpretation of this approach as well as an example of its application from my ongoing research on fair trade.
Keywords: political activist ethnography; institutional ethnography; activist research; social movement; fair trade; ethical trade

Résumé. Dans cet article je revisite et augmente sur l'article importante de George Smith (1990), "l'Activiste Politique comme Ethnographe." L'ethnographie d'activiste politique (EAP) est une forme spécialisée d'ethnographie institutionnelle (EI) qui n'a pas reçu suffisamment d'attention dans les vingt ans suivants la publication originale de l'article de Smith. Comme parti d'un effort de revisiter et soutenir cette approche de recherche, je fournis un récapitulation général d'EI/EAP, je m'engage d'une manière critique avec trois commentaires récents sur EAP, et j'offre une nouvelle interprétation de cette approche ainsi qu'un exem-

1. I have been very fortunate in my graduate studies at the University of Victoria and at York University to work with and learn from a number of creative and inspiring people. I first learned and practiced IE/PAE at UVic under the supervision of Dorothy Smith, Bill Carroll, and Marie Campbell. Mark Vardy suggested I undertake what became the study Dorothy and I did in Vancouver. I owe them and others at UVic a great debt for their kindness and encouragement. I learned so much in doing research with Dorothy. I want to thank her, Susan Turner, and Rural Women Making Change for that opportunity, and I want to thank Dorothy for offering comments on an early draft of this article. Eric Mykhalovskiy, Penni Stewart, and Lorna Erwin challenged me to refine my formulation of PAE and to explore broader methodological questions relevant to activist research. I want to thank Marc Sinclair for being a fast friend and for doing a thorough reading of the next-to-final draft of this article. Danielle Kwan-Lafond was gracious enough to translate the article's abstract into French. I'd like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for their financial support, and the peer reviewers for their constructive criticism. Last but not least, I want to thank the interviewees of the Vancouver study for sharing their experiences and knowledge with Dorothy and I.

ple de son application fondé dans mes recherches courantes sur le commerce équitable.
Mots clés: thnographie d'activiste politique, thnographie institutionnelle, commerce équitable

Introduction

Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith's scholarship, beginning in the mid-1970s, created and largely shaped what has become institutional ethnography (IE), a Marxist-feminist, reflexive-materialist, qualitative method of inquiry. While IE is increasingly recognized and used in the academy across Canada and beyond, George Smith's (1990) innovative approach to IE, dubbed political activist ethnography (PAE) after his path-breaking essay "Political Activist as Ethnographer" is less known and used.[2] In this article I revisit and expand upon G. Smith's research approach in the hope it might become better known and taken up by more activist researchers. I first provide an overview of IE/PAE and then expand and develop it with recent commentaries on PAE and lessons from my own use of this approach.

PAE is a specialized form of IE; it is a particular way of focusing and using IE. IE is a method of inquiry for mapping the social relations mediated by texts that organize institutions (D. Smith 2005). The task of the institutional ethnographer is to map how texts are involved in coordinating the work of people in various local settings and in shaping their consciousness to the institutional reality.

> Unlike some theorizing of 'text,' the term is used here strictly to identify texts as material in a form that enables replication (paper/print, film, electronic, and so on) of what is written, drawn, or otherwise reproduced. Materiality is emphasized because we can then see how a text can be present in our everyday world and at the same time connect us into translocal social relations. (D. Smith 2005:228)

PAE is a form of IE focused on mapping the social organization of ruling regimes that activists wish to change. An IE is done from an embodied, situated standpoint in the everyday world. In the case of PAE,

2. George Smith was a gay rights and AIDS activist researcher. In his article, he outlines a particular way of using and extending IE that was first called PAE in Frampton et al. (2006). Because of the distinctiveness of his approach to IE, I refer to his approach as PAE. Where I refer to the techniques and orientation of IE it is safe to say the same is true for PAE. At times I use the shorthand "IE/PAE" to acknowledge this fact. Where PAE differs from IE or extends or focuses it in a specific way, I refer to the method as PAE to emphasize its distinctiveness and potential.

this standpoint is that of an activist, the details of which are case specific. G. Smith (1990:646) conceptualizes activism as work and considers researching the social organization of ruling regimes that activists confront as part of that work. Systematic maps of ruling regimes enable strategies for making change. G. Smith's (1990) PAE explores the social organization of ruling regimes confronted by activists that are external to their political organization or more generally their social movement. He does not, however, explore the social organization of activist work itself and its relation to the institutions of the social movement of which it is a part, participates in, and helps produce.

Through researching fair trade activism using PAE, I began to recognize that the local, embodied work of activists, much like other forms of work, often hooks into, is coordinated by, and is at times accountable to translocal ruling regimes. Sometimes these institutions are established by a social movement in and through its institutionalization process (if a movement gets to that point). So, for instance, in my ongoing research I explore how fair trade certification standards created and monitored by "nongovernmental" organizations (NGOs) translocally coordinate the work of activists lobbying the City of Vancouver to adopt an Ethical Purchasing Policy (achieved in 2005) with the work of many other people variously situated in the fair trade movement and system of exchange around the world. PAE can therefore be used to both inquire into the social organization of ruling regimes that activists confront, like the City of Vancouver, and those that hook into and coordinate that activism, in this instance, the fair trade certification system and the larger nonprofit industrial complex (NPIC; see Rodriguez 2007 and Gereffi, Garcia-Johnson, and Sasser 2001). Expanding the PAE field of inquiry in this way is one of the contributions this article makes. The other interrelated contribution is demonstrating how PAE can be used to investigate methods of organizing for change.

This expanded version of PAE has an increased capacity to extend the working knowledge and reflexivity of activists because its purview includes a systematic investigation of how activists' work hooks into and is coordinated by translocal ruling relations, including those of their movement and/or political organization. This could enable activists to strategically decide when to comply with the ruling relations of their movement and when to defy those relations. It could also show ways to change a movement's institutions to better serve the movement or a particular political end.[3]

3. Susan Murray (2003) provides an excellent feminist analysis of the ethical issues related to role conflict in field research and in writing up research results for publication.

G. Smith's "Political Activist as Ethnographer" was reprinted in the recent edited volume, *Sociology for Changing the World* (Frampton et al. 2006). Unfortunately, the essays that comprise this collection do not predominantly remain faithful to the core premises of IE, and hence to G. Smith's project of PAE. While this book outlines some valuable activist and research lessons, it does not adequately tell us how to actually conduct research for activists using PAE. Such an enterprise, in my view, necessarily must begin with the acknowledgement that activism is work that is done locally in and through particular and definite material, temporal, and spatial conditions and situational contexts, and that activist work is coordinated by and hooks into translocal ruling relations. Activist work, like other forms of work, is socially organized in particular ways. The social organization of activist work for fair trade, for instance, cannot be assumed to be the same as the social organization of the work done by AIDS activists. "Work" is a concept used in IE/PAE, but not the majority of studies of social movements. As I show in Section One's overview of IE/PAE, the generous concept of work used in IE/PAE enables researchers to explicate the breadth of work activists do.

Section Two builds on and develops this overview of IE/PAE by critically reflecting on three recent commentaries on PAE (Campbell 2006; Kinsman 2006; Mykhalovskiy and Church 2006). In Section Three, examples from my ongoing research on fair trade expand PAE even further, showing that the political activist as ethnographer can both inquire into the social organization of ruling regimes that activists confront and those that hook into and coordinate activists' work, and that PAE can be used to explore methods of making change. In the conclusion, I synthesize the lessons drawn from the recent commentaries and from my own research.

An Overview of Institutional Ethnography and an Analytic Reflection of "Political Activist as Ethnographer"

Dorothy Smith (1987) gives practical substance to institutional ethnography as a Marxist-feminist, reflexive-materialist sociology that begins from the standpoint of people.[4] Institutional ethnographers explore questions about the social organization of everyday life, and how people experience and help produce that organization. Smith theorizes IE as a research approach with three main procedures (1987:166–167). The first explicates the everyday work of the subjects of inquiry. The second locates that work in the local and translocal social relations in which it is

4. In this early formulation, Smith identified the starting point of IE as the standpoint of women.

embedded. The third analyzes how ideologies and discourses coordinate those relations.

An IE takes as its problematic the constellation of relations in which the local social world is entrenched. The researcher is not limited to what can be directly seen or to what research participants have observed. The result of an IE is a map of text-mediated social relations that shows how the institutions of interest are organized to coordinate the work of people in various local settings with one another and to shape their consciousness in specific ways (D. Smith 2005). This research product comes in two forms. The first is a detailed depiction of the social organization of people's work variously implicated in the institutions of interest. Second, this description provides the foundation for proposals to change the social organization of the institution in one way or another to improve people's lives and work, and/or to make it easier for them to access the institution's services. It also offers research participants the opportunity to make recommendations for change.

Institutional ethnographers use various methods, such as interviews, participant observation, and textual analysis. Interviews are used in IE to learn from and assemble the work knowledge of variously situated people, and to build an understanding of how their work and consciousness are coordinated by social relations mediated by texts that organize institutions (DeVault and McCoy 2006). Participants are recruited through purposive sampling on this basis. Interviewing and recruitment often include two central strategies. The first strategy explores with research subjects their working knowledge of the organizational procedures that they are a part of and participate in. Interviewing subjects positioned differently vis-à-vis the institutions of interest enables the researcher to map the germane organizational sequences of action involving people and text-mediated relations. The second strategy uses previous institutional ethnographic research in the area of text-mediated social organization (e.g., D. Smith 1990a, 1990b, 1990c; Turner 2002, 2006; Eastwood 2005), to guide the researcher in viewing organizational texts as constituents of organizational procedures. Institutional ethnographic interviews also aim to uncover what research participants know about how texts practically play a part in the routine co-ordering and coordinating of their work. Unlike researchers who use interviews to collect data on individual experience, institutional ethnographers use interviews as part of a method of mapping institutional and organizational processes (DeVault and McCoy 2006:15). In IE, talking with people is meant to open doors into the ruling relations and how the local hooks into translocal governing and bureaucratic processes, rather than windows into participants' inner experience (2006). Formal and informal

interviews and meetings are often complemented in institutional ethnographies by participant observation.

IE participant observers cannot leave their bodies to observe from an Archimedean point (Diamond 1992; D. Smith 1987).[5] Their epistemology of the everyday world as problematic recognizes that they remain materially grounded in their bodies in "real-time" at a particular place in a particular situational context in which they are making observations (Diamond 2006:47). In IE one isn't able to predict what one is going to do, including what questions one will ask, and therefore, one cannot predict in advance what one will find out (2006:46–47). This type of step-by-step analysis is guided in IE by the problematic of the particular study (more on this below). The participant observer watches for contrasting standpoints and how people's experiences are text-mediated by focusing on the sequencing and activating of texts. Simultaneously, the researcher explores the social relations comprising and coordinating materials and investigates these relations as themselves material (2006:52). Observation is thus a reflexive-material activity of bodies and settings (2006). IE in general, and participant observation in particular, insists on a depiction of action and is meant to explore the social as it happens, in action, as a continual concerting of activities (2006:62). The institutional ethnographer looks for ways to collapse the imagined ontological distinction between "the micro" and "the macro." Institutional ethnographers prefer to think that they are analyzing the co-constitution of the local and the translocal in and through people's doings.

Being grounded in one's body in the context of a specific time, space, place, and sequence of action helps accomplish this feat. The investigator can proceed from there to observe texts being read, activated, and put into play in a sequential and dogmatic hierarchy, hooking people's activities into the institutional. The analyst can then explore how institutional procedures are co-ordered and coordinated by text-mediated social relations (Diamond 2006). Drawing texts into analysis is vital for looking up into ruling relations from a standpoint in the everyday historical-geographical-material world. Texts have a seemingly magical power of allowing one to journey beyond embodied locality, but the institutional ethnographer needs to hold onto that material basis (2006:62). The re-

5. There is a body of methodological work on the objectivity/subjectivity divide in research. Hegelund (2005) argues that an attempt to increase the validity of one's results implies that they are more objective (that is, closer to "what actually happened") than if one did not take these measures. We didn't think of what we were doing exactly in this way. We wanted to "get it right" in a "good enough" sort of way because we knew that people might rely on our research in the future in trying to make change in their municipalities. We also recognized that, as Gary Alan Fine (1993:280) puts it, "[t]he ability to be observant varies, and we should not assume that what is depicted in the ethnography is the whole picture." Indeed, that is an impossible expectation.

searcher goes "into local settings to see beyond them, or rather to see the beyond within them" (2006:58). This entails first critically reflecting on one's experiences and those of known others as the basis for the research problematic. Second, in entering the local settings of "field sites," the investigator looks for the ways that work done locally is organized by and oriented to translocal, text-mediated, ruling relations. In all of this investigatory work and the writing of it, the researcher tries to preserve the presence of subjects by quoting them, describing the settings of their work, and talking about their actions and social relations.

While most institutional ethnographies include a combination of these methods, ultimately the social organization of the phenomena under study determine the choice of methods used, how they are put to use, and the field sites. An IE is conducted reflexively from inside the social organization of the researcher's embodied life and, by extension, the social worlds investigated in the course of inquiry. Interviews, participant observation, critical self-reflection, and textual analysis extend the everyday knowledge of the researcher's own world to include an understanding of other people's lives, work processes, and organization.

G. Smith (1990) discusses two studies in which he drew on and extended D. Smith's institutional ethnographic research approach. The two studies discussed in this essay are on the policing of the gay community in Toronto and on the management of the AIDS epidemic in Ontario (1990:629). These studies, according to G. Smith (1990:629–630), share six features:

1. They begin from the standpoint of people located outside the social organization of ruling regimes.
2. They are committed to a Marxist ontology — specifically, Marx and Engels (1976 [1846]).
3. They use the analytic "social relations."
4. They use formal and informal meetings with government and professional cadre as ethnographic data in place of formal interviews (although each IE study is unique and some do include formal interviews).
5. In an effort to explore and describe how ruling regimes are put together and work, the two studies analyze various texts — such as annual reports of government departments, legislation, internal agency memoranda, and media reports — as constituents of social relations that constitute, are constituted by, and coordinate ruling regimes.
6. They deploy and develop the technique of the "materialist epoché" — more commonly referred to as the "ontological shift" in IE/PAE,

> as will be discussed further below — as a device for bracketing speculative political explanations of how ruling regimes work in order to build a systematic account of the regime's social organization with an eye to changing it.

In what follows I will critically reflect on G. Smith's account of his two studies in order to further introduce and explain IE/PAE.

In IE/PAE, the term "social relations" functions as a research apparatus for situating and investigating the social nature of people's doings in and across time, space, and particular situations. The analytic "social relations" can be used to explicate reflexive courses of action when it is conceptualized not as something one is looking for, but rather as "a method of looking at how individuals organize themselves vis-à-vis one another" (G. Smith 1990:636). Institutional ethnographers' reflexive understanding of the social is indebted to Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology (2010 [1967]). Garfinkel argues that textualized meanings and text-mediated social organization are not objective accounts and that researchers cannot understand their meaning as detached from the organizational contexts and uses of their production, the contexts and uses that produce and re-produce the "proper" and intended interpretations of the textualized meaning. Ethnomethodology maintains that sense, rationality, and facticity are produced dialogically through people's interactions in local historical settings. It follows from this understanding of being-knowing that sense making is not a process happening in an individual mind; rather, it is a social process.[6] So, the social is reflexive in the sense that peoples' ways of being and knowing are co-constituted and coordinated in relation to their local setting, situational context, and various known and unknown others.

"Social organization" is a notion that institutional ethnographers use to direct attention to replicable and repetitious methods of co-ordering and coordinating text-mediated social relations. Text-mediated social organization can simultaneously govern people and their actions in multiple local settings. In mapping such translocal social organization, institutional ethnographers analyze how texts are socially organized, and how they are active coordinators and organizers of people's lives and work. This method of textual analysis enables the researcher to explore complexes of regimented social relations and social organization continuously coming into fruition in and across numerous distinct locales

6. My use and development of the term "being-knowing" here is a logical extension of, as G. Smith (1990:630) puts it, the "unique epistemological/ontological grounding" of D. Smith's method and orientation to social research. The formulation "epistemological/ontological" points to the inseparability of knowing and being. Ways of being and of knowing are co-constituted on an ongoing basis in and through multiple modes of differentiation co-constituted in and through power relations (Bannerji 2005).

(D. Smith 2005:27–45; G. Smith et al. 2006 [1990]:177–179). "Social relations" and "social organization" are thus practically employed analytics for describing and exploring people's actualities, co-ordered and coordinated to each other, comprising courses of action where stages in sequences of action are dependent on each other, and oriented reflexively, not functionally, to each other (D. Smith 2005:27–45; G. Smith et al. 2006:177–179). While these strings of action are synchronized and determined in and across time and space, they are neither begun nor ended by one person (G. Smith et al. 2006:178).

According to G. Smith (1990:630–631), D. Smith's research orientation "marks a paradigm shift" between her conceptualization of sociology and "other empirical and/or radical approaches to sociology" because of "its unique epistemological/ontological grounding." This paradigm shift involves a double movement of an "epistemological shift" and an "ontological shift." The researcher makes the epistemological shift to reject objective accounts (the view-from-nowhere type) and instead practices a reflexive way of knowing the world she or he inhabits in relation to specific known and unknown others. The researcher makes the ontological shift to reject speculative explanations. This involves a move away from general and generalizing theoretical explanations to a particular, embodied, situated, "sensuous world of people's actual practices and activities" (1990:633). This technique of bracketing ideological procedures implores the researcher to focus analysis on explicating temporal-spatial-situational actualities (1990:637–638).

Hence, research begins in the social from a particular embodied, situated standpoint, not in social theory. Research aims to disrupt the ideological procedures of ruling regimes, including explanatory social theories and political ideologies that externalize and subsume subjects' consciousness to the regime's trans-temporal, trans-spatial, trans-situational understandings of the social. Instead of buying into the regime's ideological understanding of being and knowing, the reflexive-materialist, Marxist-feminist researcher must explore the temporal-spatial-situational particularities of the local, embodied experience of subjects located outside the social organization of the regime — this includes ways in which the regime hooks into the local, sensuous, social world, coordinating it in and through text-mediated relations.

Having made the ontological shift, G. Smith does not ascribe forms of agency to regimes. This is why, for instance, he rejects the idealist formulation that police brutality against the gay community is caused by concepts such as homophobia, and seeks instead to scrutinize the social organization that mandates and justifies the actions of individual police officers. He understands that it is not necessarily the individual police

officers that are homophobic, though some of them may very well be; it is the Criminal Code that governs the police officers' being-knowing as agents of the state that is homophobic and reinforcing a heterosexual social order (1990:633–634). Using this research discovery, he advises a change in focus for activist groups whose previous concern was doing public relations work to outreach to individual police officers (1990:630).

For the policing paper, G. Smith (1990:632) explores the problematic of how the policing of gay men is organized. The idea of a "problematic" in IE follows the epistemological and ontological shifts required to orient to doing this type of research. A problematic arises from the experience of a disjuncture between local, embodied, everyday being-knowing and trans-temporal, trans-spatial, and trans-situational social relations coordinating ruling regimes.[7] In what follows and to close out this section, I outline the use of a generous concept of work in IE, and discuss the institutional ethnographic field of inquiry.

Institutional ethnographers understand work to be done locally in and through time, space, material conditions, and situational contexts, and that these local courses of action hook into and are coordinated by translocal ruling relations (D. Smith 1999). Local work, relations, and organization contribute to the anchoring of translocal ruling relations in particular local settings with particular effects (1999). Institutional ethnographers deploy a generous concept of work because concepts and categories of institutional ideology make some aspects of the social visible in particular and partial ways while concealing others in particular ways (D. Smith 1987). Narrow conceptualizations of work do not, for example, account for women's work in the home — it is predominantly still women who do this work. Their work is not made observable-reportable in the economic sense. The women's movement fought and continues to organize to expand the category "work." An expanded notion of work makes visible work that is done but not observable-reportable in institutional accounting practices (1987). Hence, drawing on her involvement in the women's movement, D. Smith (1987:165) deploys a generous concept of work to make visible "what people do that requires some effort, that they mean to do, and that involves some acquired competence." Institutional ethnographers understand institutional procedures as courses of action, as work organization. This means that the field of inquiry is the complex of work processes that accomplish the institutional, whether all of this work is made visible in accounting practices or not. An IE thus goes beyond the institution's ideologically defined functional boundaries in order "to explore those aspects of the work organization that are essential to its

7. D. Smith (1987) refers to this disjuncture as a bifurcation of consciousness.

operation" (1987:166). The entirety of this work organization is the institutional ethnographer's field of inquiry.

Three Recent Commentaries on PAE

Having introduced IE, and G. Smith's interpretation and use of it, I now turn to three recent commentaries on PAE (Campbell 2006; Kinsman 2006; Mykhalovskiy and Church 2006) in an effort to bolster this approach by assessing its possibilities and constraints. I do so by discussing issues pertaining to:

1. power relations between academics and activists in PAE;
2. writing up and disseminating the results of a PAE;
3. political activist ethnographers' rejection of speculative accounts and their related commitment to mapping the social organization of problems facing activists and their constituencies; and
4. the extension of this social cartography to include an analysis of the ruling relations of activist work.

The social ontology of political activists as ethnographer and their commitment to explicating the actualities of people's everyday lives and work lessens "the problem of power-sharing between academics and activists" (Campbell 2006:87) but does not necessarily eliminate this issue, especially when the researcher is an outsider to the activist group and/or its constituency (Mykhalovskiy and Church 2006:78). In addition, a commitment to doing research for activists does not necessarily eliminate the problem of the inaccessibility of academic language to many people outside of academia or outside of the specific field of study (Campbell 2006:87; Mykhalovskiy and Church 2006:82–83). To make research results understandable and useful, political activist ethnographers should improve their ability to write up their research in plain language as well as continually seek out ways to disseminate research results through various forms of media.[8] For example, Kathryn Church (Mykhalovskiy and Church 2006:82–83), a PAE-inspired activist researcher working with the psychiatric survivor movement, has experimented with various ways of disseminating and communicating research results, including

8. Participatory action research (PAR) shares this commitment. While PAE and PAR are both critical of positivism, these approaches differ in many respects. For example, according to Budd Hall (1984:291–294), two of PAR's central principles are: 1) research should be democratic and participatory, hence it should involve the people the study is being done for throughout the entire investigatory process, including the formulation of research questions and in the use of the results; and 2) someone or a group of people from the community the study is for should be in control of the project. As I make clear in this section as well as the next one and the conclusion, PAE does not share these commitments that are fundamental to PAR.

arts-informed research and a documentary quality film, to build internal movement knowledge and awareness of the movement to external audiences.

Doing research for activists necessarily entails making recommendations for taking specific courses of action to realize specific ends. Analysis of a problem is of little use to activists, or anyone for that matter, if a course of action for creating the desired change is not suggested; whether the suggested course of action is taken up is another matter, of course. One strategy that PAE recommends is getting beyond thinking of right and wrong to look at how the problem you wish to address is socially organized. It can be tempting at times "to classify different perspectives as simply right or wrong" (Campbell 2006:90), but as many seasoned organizers are likely aware, doing so is not often effective in trying to create institutional change. As Marie Campbell (2006:91) explains,

> It may not be so easy to identify interests within officialdom. Official views are usually presented as being neutral and official actions as being in the public interest, or for the common good. It may therefore be ineffective to challenge them on the level of claims about which view is 'right.' For activist researchers, that means learning a set of research strategies beyond critiquing differing perspectives and their appearance in public policies. Activists must also learn how to understand and engage with the actions of public administration whereby policies are planned, implemented and evaluated. Ruling interests are enacted routinely through specific administrative practices. When attempting to intercede on behalf of marginalized people, activists must discover how their constituency's interests are being marginalized in routine organizational action.

Campbell (2006:90) explains that a political activist ethnographer can analyze how government decision-makers hold ruling perspectives that "are embedded in officialdom and how they buttress official actions and discount other knowledge and other actions." I would add to this point that activists' perspectives are also sometimes embedded in the officialdom of their particular organization and/or social movement, so while activists may challenge some ruling perspectives in confronting ruling regimes, activist work is also organized by ruling relations.

Gary Kinsman (2006:139) explains that mapping "the institutional relations and obstacles that movements are facing identifies the contradictions that exist in ruling relations and illustrates the weak points that can be actively challenged." This mapping involves figuring out potential allies and alliances to further and expand the struggle, and it "builds on and extends the research capacities of movement activists" (2006:155). It begins "from where movement activists are with their practices, in-

sights and questions, with what they are confronting, with what they are learning and with what their knowledge is" (2006:139–140). PAE aims to go beyond what activists already know in order to bolster their understandings and strategies for realizing their/our goals. So this type of social cartography work is not only a technical matter; it is a social and political enterprise (2006:136).

Mapping the social relations of struggle, according to Kinsman (2006:139, emphasis added), differs from other types of IE mapping work because the former produces "a relational sketch of the *conflicts between ruling relations and social movements*." He assumes that movements are always working against or in confrontation with ruling relations. While his interpretation of PAE offers useful insights, he does not recognize that community and political organizing themselves have ruling relations, so while activists confront certain ruling relations, their/our work is also coordinated by ruling relations. Mapping the social relations of struggle thus must also entail mapping the ruling relations of activist work itself. This mapping work has the potential to analyze how activist work is coordinated by ruling relations so activists can make strategic choices of when and how to comply to these ruling relations, when to ignore or defy them, and how they might be changed, if that is desirable. The results of this mapping work could also enable activists to extend their analysis beyond the ideologically defined functional boundaries of their social movement. Here is an example of this expanded version of PAE from my ongoing research on fair trade.

Expanding PAE

Studying the social organization of fair trade activist work exemplifies the point that activists confront some ruling relations in their work while being coordinated by others. A person's "ethics," "morals," or "politics" don't just come from anywhere. IE/PAE maintains that ruling relations *coordinate* people's understanding of the world — to be clear, this is not to say ruling relations *determine* understandings (D. Smith 1999). In most contemporary societies, what it is to be ethical, lawful, sane, educated, or even officially alive or dead is text-mediated and institutionally accountable. People in many religions are coordinated by the text-mediated, ruling relations of their faith. Human rights are defined and standardized by the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. In many of the activities that fair trade activists routinely do, their actions are organized by the standards and certification system

managed by Fairtrade International (FTI) and its twenty-four members.[9] The fair trade certification standards were formulated in relation to the Conventions and Recommendations of the International Labour Organization (ILO), an organization that can subsequently be seen to hook into other politico-administrative regimes like the United Nations, the organizations that make up the NPIC, corporations, and so on — all in and through text-mediated social relations.

This organization and standardization of fair trade and its embeddedness in globalizing political and economic processes coordinates the doings, language, discourse, and understandings of fair trade activists on a number of levels. The articles in Vancouver's Ethical Purchasing Policy and Supplier Code of Conduct on fair trade are written in relation to FTI's and Fairtrade Canada's fair trade standards and third party certification systems. Articles in the policy documents on No Sweat garments are written in relation to the ILO's Conventions and Recommendations. In my ongoing research on fair trade activism, one of things I've been able to do is explicate the work fair trade and union (No Sweat) activists did in relation to the City of Vancouver that saw the city adopt and implement these policy texts. This part of my research was done as part of a larger study with Dorothy Smith (D. Smith 2007). The problematic of my part of this larger study was to look at how the policy campaign was organized and how the process of writing the policy documents was organized. These activists had been successful in encouraging the city to adopt and implement a policy and I wanted to know more about how they did it. In the course of doing this research in 2006–2007, Dorothy and I interviewed a fair trade activist who I already knew and had worked with before, a union organizer, two city councilors, and two city managers twice each. We also attended activist and city council meetings, and mapped the text-mediated processes of writing, adopting, and implementing the city's new policy.

I had been a fair trade activist on the national level in Canada for two years when we began our research, but it was only in the course of this study that I really began to think critically about how the fair trade certification standards shape the way activists in places like Vancouver speak with one another and plan campaign objectives. In a way I had to unlearn fair trade and antisweatshop activism at the same time that Dorothy was learning about the fair trade and No Sweat movements. To help me realize what I already knew about these movements and their

9. FTI's twenty-four member organizations include: nineteen national labelling initiatives covering twenty-three countries, three producer networks (one each for producers in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia), and two associate members, Comercio Justo México and Fairtrade Label South Africa.

social organization, Dorothy asked me to tell her about them in a series of informal emails, as if I was telling her as a friend unfamiliar with these movements about their activities and organization — which is, in effect, what I was doing. Through this process I shared my competencies with Dorothy, much like an interviewee does with an interviewer. She asked me to expand on or clarify certain points along the way. Rereading these emails afterward helped me to critically reflect on what I thought I knew about the fair trade and No Sweat movements, where the holes in my current knowledge were, and what I might be taking for granted as simply "natural" or given about these movements. In other words, this process of informal email exchanges allowed me to critically reflect on my ideological understanding of fair trade. In this study I wasn't just "going native" (Fine 1993:284) or trying to avoid that; as a fair trade activist I was a "native" and this was our way of dealing with that reality. Through this process of critical self-reflection, I started to see the language and discourse of fair trade as socially organized and as a social organizer which coordinated our talk, understandings, and practices as activists in Canada in relation to the national and international fair trade standards and certification systems. Our understandings of fair trade, what it is, what it does, and its similarities and differences to free trade are coordinated by the fair trade standards which we reproduce on a regular and routine basis along with the rhetoric that various people in the fair trade movement produce to convince themselves/ourselves and others of the worth and purpose of fair trade.

Beyond sharing and reflecting on the social organization of the fair trade and No Sweat movements in this general sense, Dorothy and I needed to build systematic maps of how the Vancouver policy campaign was organized, how the policy was written and how the city managers and staff took it up in the implementation process and made it actionable. We decided the best way to start this process was for me to sit down with my fair trade activist friend, whom I gave the pseudonym Jack, who had been involved in the campaign and the policy writing process. Because Jack and I knew one another, Dorothy and I figured he would take the time to give us a broad overview of the campaign and the policy writing process. We figured right. It was a casual conversation that lasted about 150 minutes. We sat at Dorothy's kitchen table over fair trade coffee and Jack told me the history of the campaign from the beginning as he saw it, from the initial formation of a coalition of NGOs, unions, and community organizations to how the coalition organized itself. He walked me through the organizing process of encouraging the city to strike a taskforce to write a draft policy, details of the three month policy writing process, and the process that the city council took in considering the

draft policy, officially adopting it about two months after receiving the draft from the taskforce.

Jack had brought a file folder of his notes on the process and various drafts of the policy that the taskforce had worked through. He was gracious enough to allow me to photocopy his files and share them with Dorothy. In subsequent steps of our research, we were able to check Jack's narrative of the policy writing process against his files. Since the policy had been adopted almost a year before we started our research, in preparation for this interview I drew a diagram that depicted the step-by-step process the city went through in adopting the policy as far as I could tell from various publicly available texts on the city's website (the policy texts, council meeting minutes, minutes of standing committees of council, and reports to council by city managers) and on the websites of various activist organizations (analysis of the policy in relation to ILO standards and to similar policies adopted by other institutions). I showed Jack my diagram and asked him to clarify the points in the sequence of text-mediated action that the diagram depicted that I couldn't make sense of or points where I thought information or steps in the process might be missing. He helped me understand who the individuals involved from the city were, their positions in the municipal government and bureaucracy, and the social organization of the city government and bureaucracy as he saw it.

Having Jack's narrative of the campaign and the policy writing process and his files enabled me to refine my map of this sequence of text-mediated action. This refined map showed Dorothy and I where we were in our research, what we had found out so far, what information we felt we were missing, and what outstanding questions we had. This allowed us to decide what our next step would be. There were certain aspects of the initial stages of the campaign to encourage the city to make ethical trade a priority and to consider drafting a policy that Jack simply didn't know given his position in the activist coalition, but he told us who did, a local union activist whom I gave the pseudonym Simon. Simon had been on the executive of the political party that held a majority number of seats on the city council at the time the campaign and policy development process occurred. In the two-hour interview we subsequently conducted with him in his union office we were able to fill in the gaps in our information on the campaign as well as crosscheck Jack's version of things. Simon told us how he shamed the city council into agreeing to strike a taskforce to draft the policy that would include two city managers, two councillors, and many members of the activist coalition. He also told us that he found the best way to deal with city managers who he speculated might throw up obstacles to complicate or impede the policy process was

to ask them at the beginning if they foresaw any problems, box them into that position, and figure out ways to deal with their concerns. Contrary to Simon's speculation, Jack said that the city managers involved in the process didn't try to sabotage it. In a subsequent interview, we asked one of the city managers about this and he explained that once council made this issue a priority it was his job to make it work because city managers are responsible to council and the policies they set.

After processing the information Simon had shared with us, we felt we had enough information on the campaign and we had a good idea of how the policy writing process went in the eyes of the activists. Our next step in the study was to talk with a city manager about the policy and its implementation. The activists by and large didn't know how the policy was being implemented; the city managers were reluctant to talk to them about it and explained that they were responsible to council, not a bunch of activists. But, it was public information that the city had hired a procurement expert to oversee the implementation process so the coalition figured the policy was indeed being implemented. Not knowing the extent and organization of the implementation process concerned them though. This was information Dorothy and I reckoned we might have an easier time accessing than the coalition.[10] Dorothy arranged an interview with the procurement expert who the city hired to work with the relevant city managers to implement the policy. In an approximately 90 minute interview, the procurement expert gave Dorothy a detailed narrative of what she does in her daily work, how that work is organized by the structure of the municipal government and bureaucracy, and how it is done in relation to various laws, regulations, standards, protocols, and "best practices" of her profession. Subsequent to this interview, Dorothy and I interviewed one of the city managers who had been involved in writing the policy and who ultimately was responsible for coordinating the work of the procurement expert and other city staff in implementing the purchasing policy along with all of the other related city policies. As we gathered more information in these interviews, we continued to refine our maps of the various text-mediated processes of coordinated action. We interviewed the city manager and procurement expert again as well as the two city councillors involved in the policy writing process to check the accuracy of our understanding of the process, the organiza-

10. This is not to imply that we lied to the city managers about our intentions. They knew that we would be sharing our research results with a variety of people/audiences, including ethical trade activists. In general, the managers were proud of the policy, and the work of implementing the policy was something they boasted about to their peers during professional conferences and to their public administration and procurement students in the courses they taught online and in local colleges. Like politicians, high-level administrators have reputations to build and maintain.

tion of their work, and how texts practically play a part of their routine daily work of public administration. Interviewing these variously situated subjects along with the activists enabled us to go beyond what the activists already knew about the process. Based on all of the information we had gathered, we produced an action guide for making change in municipalities, put it online, shared it with our research participants, and dispersed it throughout various activist channels in the hope that other people could learn from the Vancouver experience and use the guide in their efforts to make community-driven change in their municipalities.[11]

This was the end of the Vancouver study, but a PAE on fair trade activism could go much further. We could extend this project beyond the local policy campaign to explore in more detail how the local campaign is embedded in and coordinated by the text-mediated ruling relations of the NPIC, and the corporations, private foundations, and various levels of government that hook into the NPIC. We can bend G. Smith's idea that activists learn a lot in and through confrontations with ruling regimes to investigate tensions between grassroots activists and movement institutions. These confrontations could tell us how the ruling regimes of a movement are socially organized and how they simultaneously coordinate the work of various actors in multiple locales in particular ways. We could look at how different sources of funding for the certification agencies and NGOs involved in fair trade and the related international development industry shape what these organizations do, how they go about trying to accomplish their objectives, what they understand themselves to be doing, and how ideologies and discourses coordinate those relations and the consciousness of various people implicated in them.

Conclusion

This essay is about conceptualizing a way to do ethnography for activists. To this end, I have explicated IE as a Marxist-feminist, reflexive-materialist, qualitative method of inquiry, and its specialized form, PAE. G. Smith (1990) understood and considered activism to be work. Part of his work as an AIDS and gay rights activist was researching the social organization of ruling regimes that activists confront. He recognized that he and other activists learned a lot in and through those confrontations. He specified IE as PAE in order to develop a form of inquiry that could produce systematic maps of the social organization of ruling regimes that activists wished to change. He knew that these maps could inform sound

11. The action guide is available on Rural Women Making Change's website: http://www.rwmc.uoguelph.ca/document.php?d=177 (Smith and Hussey 2007; access date: October 25, 2011).

strategic decisions and point to ways that activists may be successful in bringing about positive social change. One of my original contributions to PAE lies in the suggestion that activist work is like other forms of work in that it is often coordinated by and hooks into translocal ruling relations. My second and interrelated contribution lies in the demonstration of how PAE can be used to investigate how to go about organizing for change.

G. Smith originally conceptualized PAE as an approach to exploring the social organization of ruling regimes that activists confront that are external to their political organization or social movement. I have suggested that one way to bolster PAE is to also inquire into the social organization of activist work in relation to the institutions and ruling relations of activist and/or community organizations, the social movements they are a part of, and the larger NPIC in an effort to extend the working knowledge of activists. My contention is that the political activist as ethnographer must begin with the understanding that activism is embodied, situated work done locally in and through particular and definite material, temporal, spatial, and situational conditions and contexts, and that this work hooks into and is coordinated by the translocal ruling relations of organizations that activists work in and against. "Work" is not a concept used in most studies of social movements, and though institutional ethnographers know and use the generous concept of work theorized by D. Smith, I have pointed toward a new way of focusing that analytic for use in PAE.

Political activist ethnographers' ontological and epistemological commitments do not allow for the types of compromises and analytic closures that other activist research approaches advocate (see Hale 2006). At the same time, in doing PAE in the manner articulated here, political activist ethnographers do need to be sensitive to the fact that they are working for activists and it is counterintuitive to disseminate information that is going to impinge on the goals of those activists. PAE is a sociology for people and for social and community movements in the sense that the investigation starts in the everyday lives of movement activists and/or their constituency and the research results are meant to illustrate how ruling relations shape the experiences of those people. PAE is not, however, a sociology for people and movements in the sense of starting with the problems that the movement poses if these problems "have a particular ideological character or rely on forms of speculation that are discouraged by institutional ethnographic inquiry" (Mykhalovskiy and Church 2006:81). In order to empirically investigate how people's lives are coordinated by ruling relations, PAE must start in the everyday work and actualities of those lives, not in speculation about them — "identity-

based social movements and community organizations are not a shortcut into the everyday experiences and problems faced by those they seek to help" (Mykhalovskiy and Church 2006:81).

The ongoing processes to reshape universities and academic work coordinated by ideologies of capitalism and of neoliberalism have implications for how PAE can be used and the extent to which it can be used by university and government funded researchers (Mykhalovskiy and Church 2006:84–85). PAE and other critical forms of inquiry have uneasy relationships with universities and funding agencies that value "commercial, applied and/or managerial knowledges," measure academic work in terms of output, and "push for forms of research dissemination, or 'knowledge translation,' that privilege a service relationship between the academy and sites where policymakers and other 'decision-makers' do their work" (Mykhalovskiy and Church 2006:84). In addition, the "expansion of ethical policing of university-based research … privilege[s] a formal, proceduralist interpretation of ethics … that potentially discourages ethnographic fieldwork" (Mykhalovskiy and Church 2006:85). None of these developments and relations favour PAE and other critical approaches, but "[t]he university research apparatus cannot fully foreclose the possibilities of university-associated activist ethnography" (Mykhalovskiy and Church 2006:85). Institutional and political activist ethnographers must continually look for "ways of appropriating emerging discourses of university-based research … [and ways] to represent their research efforts strategically" (Mykhalovskiy and Church 2006:85).

While I heed the advice of Eric Mykhalovskiy and Kathryn Church (2006) about not beginning in movement speculation and that it can be useful to separate the doing of research from the use of research results, I'd like to close this essay by building on their point that PAE is explicitly set up to analyze social relations and social organization, not individuals and any "inner meanings" they may articulate about themselves. PAE does not use the dialogically produced articulation of subjects' experiences for this purpose. Therefore, when I say that PAE can be used to explore the social organization of activist work and the ruling relations that hook into and coordinate that work as well as the ruling relations and regimes that activists rail against, I am not saying that we should study activists as individuals and I am not saying we should go about trying to explain and categorize them, their work, and actualities. If a political activist ethnographer aims to map the social organization of the ruling regimes activists confront, while simultaneously explicating the social organization of the ruling relations that hook into and coordinate activist work, then the focus of inquiry is on institutions and the text-mediated

ruling relations that constitute the institutional and are constituted by the co-ordered and coordinated work of the people that make up those institutions on an ongoing basis.

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