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Postscript. "Hughesian Sociology" and the Centrality of Occupation

(doi: 10.2383/32717)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, maggio-giugno 2010

Ente di afferenza:

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Postscript. “Hughesian Sociology” and the Centrality of Occupation

by Marco Santoro

doi: 10.2383/32717

As a cultural form, the “outline” is not very praised by scholars. Indeed, it is so little considered that even naming it seems too much. Who would include an “outline of something” in her curriculum vitae? Who would quote it among her authored texts? I am not aware of any discussion of what an “outline” is – while there are almost classical analyses of what an essay, a lesson or an address are [see respectively Adorno 1984; Bourdieu 1982; Goffman 1981], and recent explorations of even what a powerpoint presentation means, presupposes, and generates. However, there are good reasons to think that the “outline” is not totally short of merits, and that it has stylistic peculiarities and communicative features that make it a genre in itself. As the word implies, an outline outlines, i.e. describes in the most elementary and essential terms. This is what we ask an outline and the main reason why we draft outlines: to communicate the main tenets of our position to ourselves as well as to others. In scientific communication, outlines are important devices to clarify our ideas for our audiences, but also for ourselves. What is essential – or we think will be essential – in an argument, an approach, an idea, an article, a conference, a lesson etc., has to be included in its outline, without supplemental and not strictly necessary words. Only the most crucial points, in a skeleton-like form, have to be included.

Thanks to Howard S. Becker for his reading and suggestions, and to Roberta Sassatelli and Marco Solaroli for their editorial help.

There is indeed another meaning of "outline," which underlines not the essential but the provisional character of an argument, an idea, an approach etc. This is the meaning, e.g., of the word in the title of one of the most impressive intellectual tour-de-force in the recent history of social sciences [i.e. Bourdieu 1977; see also Bourdieu 1968]. But here the word "outline" (in this case a translation, respectively, of the French *Esquisse* and *Éléments*) sounds more like a rhetorical device for transmitting the reader what the author thinks is still an imperfect or unfinished text, independently of the real development of her thought and of the nature of the final product – which could even be a true book, or a theoretical article. Albeit connected, the two meanings of "outline" should therefore be distinguished. However, they clearly share commonalities, which I would synthesize in two words: essentiality and provisionality.

No wonder that Hughes has drafted many outlines, as many of his past and present, and possibly future, colleagues all over the world, indeed – including his Chicago masters.¹ A pragmatic mind, strongly disposed to teach and communicate, more inclined to oral rather than written knowledge transmission, and in the last case more oriented towards the essay-form rather than the book format, Hughes had a special attraction for minor communicational devices. Also his *magnus opus*, the huge *The Sociological Eye*, is a collection of minor texts, mainly papers which had been originally written for public meetings, or (even short) presentations of other texts. As it is widely known, in doing so Hughes distinguished himself from many colleagues of him. Arguably more noticeable, and not enough emphasized, is the fact that this kind of writing was so important for him that he could think it was worth quoting one of its instances in an important retrospective article, providing it with a proper name and a certain aura which is not so common in the academic discourse. His words might deserve a long quotation, since they are of the greatest interest for the social historians of sociology (and besides the sociologists of work and occupations to whom they were more directly addressed):

In the late 1930's, throughout the 1940's, and into the 1950's, several of us at the University of Chicago were engaged in studies of industry. In 1939, I began to teach a course on professions. People from various departments of the university and from

¹ I would suggest that something like a "culture of the outline" was already established in Chicago when Hughes began his sociological career there: although not identified as such, W.I. Thomas's *Race Psychology: Standpoint and Questionnaire with Particular Reference to the Immigrant and Negro* [Thomas 1912] belongs to this culture and contributed to its enactment and legitimation, as well as Park's classic *The City*, with its "suggestions for the investigation of behavior in the city environment" [Park 1915]. For a famous instance of the same culture in another sociological tradition (Harvard's structural functionalism) see in particular Parsons [1961]. It is worth noting that in those years Parsons was collaborating with E. Shils, who studied at Chicago.

many occupations came into the course; many of them wanted to write about the efforts of their own occupation to have itself recognized as a profession (...) From the claims and hopes of people in the many occupations seeking professional status, we learned what the concept means to people. I soon changed the name of the course to “The Sociology of Work,” both to overcome to some extent the constant preoccupation with upward mobility of occupations and also to include studies of a greater variety of occupations and problems. A good many students wrote papers on the occupations of their fathers, their kin, and even on their own. Some of the papers were developed into more systematic studies and were presented as theses. The occupations considered included – I write them down as they come to me – janitors, junk dealers (and how they come to engage in the recovery industry), furriers, funeral directors, taxi drivers, rabbis, school teachers, jazz musicians, mental hospital attendants, osteopaths, city managers, pharmacists, and YMCA secretaries. Others studied lawyers, physicians, and the clergy, as well as the newer professions or the newer specialties in these older professions. We studied workers, union leaders, and management in a variety of industries. As the war wore on, industry wanted more workers and some of them were willing to consider hiring Negroes, women, and even the Japanese (our enemy). That gave occasion to learn something about acceptance and rejection of new kinds of colleagues by workers in industry, as well as my management and the professions. We also got clues about how levels and directions of effort and production are determined in both lowly and proud kinds of work. Those who perform services, it turned out, prefer some customers, clients, patients, or even sinners, to others. Some tasks in any occupation are preferred over others; some are jealously guarded, while others are gladly delegated to those they consider lesser breeds, such as women or Negroes, either inside or outside the occupation (profession). The contingencies which face people as they run their life-cycle, their career at work, turned out to be a constant theme. The great variety of students and of occupations and work situations studies stimulated the search for and the finding of common themes. Some of these common themes I put into an Outline for Sociological Study of an Occupation which was used by a whole generation of students [Hughes 1970, then collected in Hughes 1971, 418-19].

I cannot surely claim the outline Hughes is referring to in this passage to be the same which is published here, but there are good reasons – beginning with its title²

² This passage is recalled and emphasized also by Robert C. Prus: “It may well have been as an advisor in the area of work and occupations that Hughes was strong conceptually. For it was here that Hughes clearly pressed his students not only for in-depth examinations of particular occupations and work settings, but also for the pursuit of conceptual themes common across occupational settings. Some of these themes he put in a “Outline for the Sociological Study of an Occupation,” which Hughes [1971, 419] indicates was used as an organizational scheme by a whole generation of students. It is difficult to tell just how much inspiration any particular student derived from Hughes’s outline or other inputs. Still, there is little doubt that some of the most valuable and exciting ethnographic works on the sociology of work were developed through student contact with Everett Hughes. And, perhaps, through his emphasis on developing comparisons or using generic features of settings Hughes provided one of his more important legacies” [Prus 1996, 126]. It is worth noting that the relevance of Chicago, and Hughes’s teachings, in the field of occupations and professions was still

– to suspect that this might be the case. This would make this short text worth of consideration beyond its objective existence as a working statement of what Hughes considered important in the study of occupation. To be sure, it is worth of consideration also because of the academic folklore that has grown around it over the years. It seems, e.g., that such an outline was highly praised by Tom Burns, who had been probably introduced to it by his friend Erving Goffman and who talked about it with his Edinburgh colleague and friend Gianfranco Poggi who, in turn, wrote about it to the author of this Postscript years later. My curiosity was already alerted when I noticed an “outline” on the study of occupations which was referred to and shortly discussed in a paper by Richard Helmes-Hayes on Hughes’s theoretical contribution to sociology. Helmes-Hayes had found the outline among other Hughes’s papers he was consulting at the Chicago University Library in the early nineties, and he was evidently stricken by it, as the following excerpt clearly shows:

Hughes’s claim that the institution is the most productive unit of analysis for sociology may be found not only in his published writings (...) but also in unpublished documents, course notes, and correspondance (...) Also crucial despite the fact it does not specifically deals with institutions per se, is the outline, “Sociological Study of an Occupation,” which Hughes used in his Occupations course. This document is telling for two reasons. First, it is clear that both institutions and occupations (the latter of which may actually be thought of as an institution in itself, for some purposes) are “going concerns” in the sense I am discussing them in this paper. Second, it demonstrates clearly that the overall logic of Hughes’s approach to the study of occupations is the same as that he employs to study institutions. It begins with a description of the “natural history” of the occupation and then moves to a description of the “institutional matrix” (or general “social organization”) within which it operates (...) Other major topics dealt with in the outline include collegue-ship, occupational control (...), the person and his career, and, finally, occupations and society. Throughout, Hughes’s intention is clear: to capture in as much depth and breadth as possible the micro-, meso-, and macro-sociological processes at work in the operation of individual occupations and within the division of labor more generally. In fact, by the simple substitution of the term institution for the term occupation, the outline is essentially transferable from one area of study to the other [Helmes-Hayes 1998, 639-640].

This is indeed what makes this short text important: its being not only an essential description of what Hughes considered relevant in the study of occupations,

recognized in the 1950s and in a very different place as Columbia University, where R. K. Merton held seminars and courses in the sociology of occupations and professions since 1949. The Chicago’s thesis on professions and occupations were something Merton wanted to know in that conjuncture, beginning with a list of their titles and authors. See Columbia University. Rare Book and Manuscript Library. *Robert K. Merton Papers* Box 132, f. 7 (where you can find also a list of Hughes’s publications, dated February 1951).

but also a clear statement of what Hughes thought sociological study of any phenomenon, that is sociology as such, should be. Therefore my reading of the Outline somehow differs from Rick Helmes-Hayes's precious and insightful one, while maintaining its most general tenet: briefly, I consider this short text as a strategic statement by Hughes himself (arguably at his best, that is as a teacher and mentor) on the nature of sociology as a knowing enterprise, independently from the object – be it an occupation, a profession or, as Helmes-Hayes puts it, an institution. It is the sociological enterprise as such to be outlined in this outline, beyond any particular social object worth of sociological investigation. If one changes “occupation” with “social object,” then a whole epistemology and methodology comes to light. If one changes “work” with “action,” or better “interaction,” then a whole interactionist methodology emerges, beyond its apparent boundaries set forth by the occupational or even economic system.

Starting from this idea, what I will offer in the following pages is not a close or even a deconstructive or genealogical reading of this text which could make problematic what looks apparent, and apparent what is hidden among the lines. (I will leave this task for another paper which is already in the making). Notwithstanding its importance, that is not my task here. Also moving from the Outline and implicitly grounding my claims on it, I will rather try to outline the main tenets of Hughes's sociology. On their parts, I hope these tenets will shed light on the Outlines themselves, providing an intellectual context and background and some useful resources to its reading. The following is a list of themes and arguments which are arguably enough organically textured and interrelated to be read as a comprehensive theoretical stance. It is clearly very different from the general systems of such theoretically minded scholars as Parsons, Habermas, or Luhmann (who have set the standards of what theory should be in the social sciences).³ At the same time, in its inner structure and outlook it is suggestedly not so different from those of such scholars as Norbert Elias, Erving Goffman, and Pierre Bourdieu, who nowadays are highly praised for their theoretical contribution in spite of their intentional reject of any general social theory, and whose conceptual tools are among the most frequently used and debated by contemporary sociologists.

1) Society – what we call “society” – looks like a bundle of interactions.

2) Interactions are both interpersonal, face-to-face, subjectively experienced, and objective, i.e. identifiable by scholars on the basis of observations and documen-

³ Standards which are, as all standards, largely arbitrary. Anyway, if for long the Chicago tradition has been received and interpreted as largely empirical and a-theoretical, this is for the impact of Parsonian standard on what social theory is. For this argument see Abbott [1999], and, with direct reference to Hughes's teachings, Becker [1998].

tary records, independently of the actors's consciousness even if the latter is the primary source of data for social observers; this means that there is a social structure which is made of interactions but it also produces and governs interactions as a larger field of direct as well as mediated interactions.

3) Claiming that society is a bundle of interactions means emphasizing that social phenomena are continuously changing and in flux, they have a processual nature; change is inscribed in social life (this does not mean that evolutionary models are the best way to capture this changing nature of social life, even if the notion of "natural history" makes a case for an idea of change as a recurrent succession, or sequence, of stages or moves).⁴

4) Every social object, be it norm, institution, social group or category, even social representation, is therefore a historical product, which is situated in specific spatial-temporal coordinates, i.e. it is context-dependent and it cannot be analyzed in general and abstract ways.

5) Every social object is what it is not thanks to some mysterious essence but because of the system of relations in which it is embedded. Even when studying an individual object, say an occupation, the task of sociology is to locate this object in a larger field of social relations.

6) Sociology is the study of recursive forms of inter-action, that is of collective action, which are seen in their incessant making, re-making, and even disappearing (that is an always open possibility).

7) Sociology is also, however, the study of social rules, norms, folkways, mores which impinge as constraints on that inter-action, not in a predetermined, or fixed way, but according to the social uses people do of those rules in their local and temporally defined context; norms are not things (choses) but are subject to interpretation and manipulation, even distortion, by the same people who are supposed to be regulated by them; however, social actors's creativity is not without limits, indeed it is historically and spatially constrained, thus the limits have to be empirically identified.

8) Language is a crucial ingredient of social life and of its study (let us remember the following sentence: "The occupation as it is. Its name, and the significance attached to it"): if social situations are what they are, that is also for the ways in which they are defined, and this depends on the social uses of terms and vocabularies; since language is a social tool, and it is crucial in social intercourse, it has to be sociologically investigated in its uses; since language is an instrument, possibly the instrument,

⁴ On the concept of "natural history" as a benchmark of Chicago sociology, see Abbott [1999]. The idea of a series of stages in professional histories has been elaborated by Wilensky [1969], and further developed (also criticized) by Abbott [1991].

of objectivation and reification, the analysis of language is the best antidote against substantialism, which is also at the basis of ethnocentrism.

9) Sociology has to be a rigorously non-ethnocentric endeavor, even if ethnocentrism is a common social feature; sociology is a cosmopolitan enterprise. Thus the adoption of a comparative gaze turns out to be crucial.

The centrality, and strategic mission, granted to language and to the analysis of words and symbolic tools makes Hughesian sociology, I suggest, an important and strikingly almost neglected (at least in historical and theoretical accounts) forerunner of current cultural sociology, and more generally an important source of the “cultural turn” which has marked contemporary sociology. This attention for language as a natural means of social life is pivotal, and it accounts for Hughes’s interest in picking up and redefining terms of ordinary language, i.e. career, drama, restriction, turning point, mandate, license etc. – making them analytical tools. Hughes was not an inventor of neologisms but a forger of definitions for well-selected terms of the ordinary linguistic repertoire. This makes his sociological writings not only extraordinarily readable but also apparently easy – even if behind or under the surface there is a complex reasoning.⁵

After one has outlined the essential features of Everett Hughes’s sociological vision, it becomes arguably more understandable why he selected, or identified, occupations as his main sociological object of study, beyond the contingencies of his own career as a student, those of Chicago’s teachings, and students’s and managers’s demands. Albeit rarely recognized as such even by social scientists, “occupation” is indeed a crucial, maybe the quintessential, social object. Not economy, religion, politics, class, the state, but occupation. Existing socially, especially in modern times but possibly in any time, means having an occupation, any occupation. As a social fellow, every human being is occupied in doing something, as he/she is occupying a place or space. Indeed, even before being a concept which refers to work, occupation has to do with a primordial, or elementary fact in social life: humans live in places, they occupy a spatially determined environment. What happens inside each social group is the transposition, the translation of this territorial, material occupation into the symbolic – but with highly material consequences – occupation of an area in the social division of labor, of an occupational role. There are strong continuities, therefore, between such ecological sociology as the one envisioned and practiced by Robert E. Park and his colleagues, and the occupational sociology cultivated and promoted by Hughes, since both are focused on processes and forms of occupation – occupation

⁵ I have synthesized here, and partly further developed, some passages of my introduction to the Italian edition of *The Sociological Eye* [Santoro 2010].

of land and soil in human ecology, occupation of areas in the social division of labor in occupational sociology.⁶

Everett C. Hughes has arguably been the first sociologist to pay sustained attention to occupation as a sociological phenomenon and to occupations as a field of sociological study.⁷ Since his very first publications, including his PhD thesis devoted to an occupation strongly involved in land control and management as real state agents [Hughes 1928; Hughes 1931], he wrote frequently and searchingly about them, taught whole courses devoted to them, and introduced a whole generations of would-be sociologists to their study [see Solomon 1968; Halmstrom 1984; Heath 1984].⁸ The list of sociologists who have been inspired by Hughes in their works on occupations is a long one and includes such names as Howie Becker, Donald Roy, Melville Dalton, Eliot Freidson and Gaye Tuchman, among many others.⁹ In a well-known autobiographical text, Goffman included himself in this list of sociologists who had been inspired by Hughes and were interested in those "small scale social entities" which are occupations [Verhoeven 1993]. The list of occupations subjected to social analysis is equally long and it is provided by Hughes himself in the quoted excerpt (and many others could be added). It is not by chance that the first chapter of the first (and last) *Festschrift* devoted to Hughes deals precisely with the "sociological study of occupations" [Solomon 1968]. Even if he was not a student of Hughes (also for biographical and demographic reasons), Andrew Abbott [1988] is arguably the last influential sociologist who worked explicitly on occupations moving from the Hughesian legacy: and the success of his widely quoted book testifies to the soundness and continuing profitability of this legacy.¹⁰ Clearly drafted with pedagogical

⁶ The link between city environment and occupational development was already envisaged in Park [1915], to be subsequently empirically investigated by Hughes.

⁷ Among Hughes's forerunners it is worth recalling here at least W. I. Thomas, who devoted an early paper to the medicine man [Thomas 1903].

⁸ Also by writing and publishing review essays and chapters in textbooks or reference books [e.g. Hughes 1959]. The major texts on occupations are collected in Hughes [1958] and Hughes [1971]. A seminal contribution are Becker *et. al.* [1961], and Becker *et. al.* [1968], written and researched under Hughes's direction and supervision, and clearly framed within his overall approach.

⁹ Among Hughes's followers we find also British scholars as Jeremy Tunstall working on media and journalism [see e.g. Tunstall 1971]. It seems Tunstall was impressed by Everett Hughes's irreverent approach to medical students in his book *The Boys in White*. This was in contrast to his views of Robert Merton's work on the medical profession which came out at the same time but looked much more reverential. Tunstall has described his research on journalists as an unmasking of an occupation albeit a relatively sympathetic kind of unmasking [see Tumber 2000, 13, n.2].

¹⁰ Indeed, Abbott draws from Hughes the central argument of his social theory of professions: that the latter exist in an ecology, and that you cannot understand or explain what happens in one profession if you do not take in consideration the system in which it is embedded, beginning with the occupations at the borders. Abbott's concept of "jurisdiction" as the (claimed, conquered, defended, usurped, etc.) link between an occupation and a certain area of the division of labor, or

aims, “Sociological Study of an Occupation” provides an essential but wide-ranging sketch of what a sociologist has to do for investigating, analyzing, and making sense of occupations as social entities. A short and modest text in itself, this outline details in a very concise but also effective way Hughes’s priorities as a student of occupations and professions, two manifestations of “men at work” that Hughes refused to consider separately, as Parsons and even Merton did.¹¹

This is what makes, I suggest, occupation the most crucial and essential sociological object. You cannot talk sociologically about religion or politics without describing religious or political people. What about religion from a strictly sociological point of view if nobody occupied a position in the social system where religious work is done? What about politics from a sociological perspective if there were no political work to do and nobody doing it? What about a working class if we do not know what this work is, and how it is organized and distributed among different kind of occupations? What about art if there were no artists working and being supported (or not enough supported, or not supported at all) by their art works?

I have therefore to partially modify my interpretation of the value of this text: it is not only about sociology, but it is also and possibly mainly about occupational sociology as the bulk, the inner core of every sociology. The fact that Hughes [1958, 7] never claimed this centrality, that he was content to present a man’s work “as good a clue as any to the course of his life, and to his social being and identity” does not prevent us from making more ambitious claims about the centrality of work, and of occupation as the purest sociological manifestation of work. Occupations are just like organizations: they are best conceived not as a specialized field but as what sociology necessarily studies, thus extending what Randall Collins [1984] had to say about organizational facts. Occupations are of course organized; but what makes organizations possible? How can you make organizations if you have nothing to organize? And what is organization-making, and organization management, if not another occupation? There is something paradoxical in claiming a higher status for occupational sociology than what is commonly granted. For the claim for higher status is, as we have seen, one of the central issues of this research field since its inception. But what is at issue here is maybe more reflexivity than paradox. After all, also sociology is an occupation, and this is what makes the study of occupation

bundle of tasks, and as the major stake in professional conflicts and professional social life, is pure Hughes.

¹¹ Indeed, the use of “men” is not correct in the case of Hughes, who devoted time and thoughts also to the study of a typically female occupation as nursing... But this is the title of one of his most influential books and still a must in any bibliography of occupational sociology [Hughes 1958].

a necessary step, and a delicate enterprise, for any reflexive sociology, that is for any sociology aware of its social condition of existence and possibility.

The *Outline's* arguments and themes highlight the strategic status of this specialty for general sociology as the empirical study of social processes in context, and they offer a useful guide for any sociologically informed and sensitive research. Whatever we are studying, it makes sense to ask what it is, what the meanings of its name, what its history, what its social organization, what about the system of authority, ranking and status which it produces and is embedded in, what the daily life (the small and large dramas of social life), what the obligations, the secrets, the mores, what about the system of controls, what is the impact on the person and her social life, both structurally and temporally (cycles, careers), and what relations exist between the studied object and society at large – including which mandate, which conflicts, which politics, which modes of collective action...

This is exactly the framework Hughes elaborated, trying to make sense of a series of individual case studies on occupations. It is a general framework, useful for investigating social life in its generality, in its plurality of forms. Far from being a specialized and relatively marginal endeavor, the sociological study of an occupation, of any occupation, is part and parcel of sociology as the disciplined study of social life. This is, I guess, one of the great legacies, still to be exploited and fully valorized by fellow sociologists, of Hughes's work.

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