



# *Qualitative Sociology Review – Book Reviews*

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## Book Review:

*Encountering the Everyday. An Introduction to the Sociologies of the Unnoticed* edited by Michael Hviid Jacobsen. Palgrave MacMillan, Houndmills 2009

The sociology of everyday life is an old topic in the sociological research, although the tradition consists of different theoretical and methodological views. In this sense, the edited volume “Encountering the Everyday” is the first comprehensive and updated book on everyday sociologies for many years, as Michael Hviid Jacobsen, the editor, states in the long introduction of the study. Hviid Jacobsen also stresses the plural form “sociologies” while writing about sociological research on everyday life. Since the tradition is formed of different philosophical and methodological orientations, it is right to say that there is not just one sociological approach to study everyday life or just one understanding of what everyday life is about. Therefore, it is incorrect to speak of everyday sociology in singular form, because it is “best thought and spoken of in the plural” (p. 15). So the right form should be “sociologies of everyday life” or “everyday life sociologies”. This remark is not just a trivial detail. In order to understand the theoretical traditions concerning everyday life, a plural form makes it understandable that everyday life is a key concept in many sociological approaches both in North America and Europe.

The book contains an Introduction and 16 chapters, which are divided into three separate parts. These are “Foundation”, “Fermentation” and “Dissemination”. In a way, the study is a chronologically ordered analysis on the development of everyday sociologies, and in this sense the different parts of the study illuminate some important orientations in the everyday life sociologies. But the structure is actually very flexible and the chapters can also be read as separate introductions to the topic. Most of the contributors are well-known experts in their field, like Paul ten Have (conversation analysis), Norman K. Denzin (interpretive interactionism), Phillip Vannini (semiotics), Stephen Hester (ethnomethodology), Robert C. Prus (pragmatism) and Dan Zahavi (phenomenology), just to mention some of the scholars. When thinking of the structure of the anthology, the exceptionally broad theoretical scope of the book raises some sceptical ideas concerning the logic of analysis, but Hviid Jacobsen’s excellent introduction to the topic gives important information to the reader on the formation of everyday life sociologies and delineates the research field in a new, more detailed way. The different chapters are also written with the idea that the reader gets the main ideas of the theoretical traditions and is able to understand how the everyday life is conceptualized in these sociological approaches.

The first part of the anthology (“Foundation”) is the widest. In this part all the essential traditions or roots of everyday sociologies are introduced. To these belong such orientations as Chicago sociology, sociological pragmatism, symbolic

interactionism, phenomenological sociology, existential sociology and critical everyday life sociologies. A common denominator to these traditions is the point that the stress is on the meaning of subjective experiences in understanding interaction, social processes and conflicting situations in everyday life. In this respect, everyday life is not something irrelevant or unscientific. What makes everyday sociologies relevant for sociological research, is the point that social action is based on rules, norms, values and ideologies, which are social in their origin. According to these traditions everyday life is based on culturally mediated symbols and socio-cultural constructions. There are also some similarities with the different approaches. Especially pragmatist, symbolic interactionist, phenomenologist and existentialist sociologies stress the point that everyday life is the most essential area of social behaviour in order to understand human sociality.

In the second part of the study ("Fermentation") some important micro-sociological research traditions are introduced. These are the French Sociologies of the Quotidian, dramaturgical sociology, ethnomethodology, conversation analysis and the sociology of absurd. Compared with the emergence of everyday sociologies, these approaches are founded on more elaborated qualitative methodologies and have also developed into outstanding directions in the sociological research with the exception of the sociology of absurd worked out by Stanford M. Lyman and Marvin B. Scott at 1970s. All the articles are excellent introductions, which contain basic knowledge of some of the most powerful research directions in modern sociology. A common background for these orientations is a critical attitude toward Talcott Parson's functionalist and system theoretical sociology and an interest to study micro-scale social processes in everyday settings. Hviid Jacobsen's analysis of the sociology of absurd is a fresh and conceptually inspiring introduction on somewhat radical view of social world as meaningless and arbitrary. Contrast to some more rational sociological approaches, the sociology of absurd stress the incidental nature of social world and individual's effort to make sense of the meaningless world around them. Since the social world is absurd, individuals are forced to construct social meanings in order to live their life meaningfully.

The last part of the study ("Dissemination") contains some reflections of current state of affairs in sociological research on everyday life. The analysis widens to the main currents in the social scientific thinking and relates to other areas of everyday life research, as Scandinavian everyday life research and feminist, anthropological, semiotic, cultural and postmodern research on everyday life. The idea of the articles is to map the key areas of research during the last two decades. In this respect, everyday life research has, on the one hand, had a specific role in Scandinavian countries (in Denmark and Norway), because of the feminist and anthropological orientation. On the other hand, socio-semiotic tradition, cultural studies and postmodern theories offer new ways of conceptualizing the everyday life in the form of emotion management, sign systems or cultural resources. In these traditions everyday life is seen as a new cultural form of social and personal life, where consumption, media and private experiences dominate the subjective experiences.

Why is everyday life an important research area in sociological research? In the first pages of the study Hviid Jacobson refers to Alvin W. Gouldner and Harold Garfinkel's view that everyday life is an unnoticed part of human life. We seldom think or criticize some elementary things in everyday life: using cars daily, surfing in the Internet, buying food from the local markets or watching television many hours every evening. By this way, some unnoticed elements of everyday life become ordinary habits, and the whole society is, actually, based on unnoticed or unconscious habits. These form the enormous fly-wheel of society, as pragmatist philosopher William James stated. According to Hviid Jacobson, sociologists should

make sense of unnoticed parts of everyday life. Instead of seeing everyday life as trivial or banal, sociologists should focus more on small-scale social processes as microcosm of late-modern life. "Encountering the Everyday" reflects this change in attitudes. As an updated and theoretically informed analysis of the sociologies of everyday life, the anthology will be an outstanding work for researchers and students interested in questions related to study everyday life in late-modern societies. It offers a broad variety of articles, which are at the same time historically informative and conceptually clarifying analyses on the various sociologies of everyday life.

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