david silverman:
from the application of rules to thinking*

An interview with David Silverman by Ilja Maso

Introduction

David Silverman is a senior lecturer in sociology at the Univer-
sity of London Goldsmith's College. One can see in his work and
his thinking remarkable changes. He started, as so many, with a
positivistic background. He experienced the unavoidability of
a lot of interpretative work in doing positivistic empirical
research, re-read Max Weber, and developed a theory of the
organization-as-action (in: The Theory of Organizations).
More or less continuing in this line of thought he read some
work of Cicourel and other ethnomethodologists and became an
ethnomethodologist himself. Together with some colleagues from
Goldsmith's College -Michael Phillipson, Paul Filmer and David
Walsch- and with Cicourrel's help came New Directions in So-
ciological Theory. Doing ethnomethodological research he was
troubled by the notion that he was using the same practices
as the practices of members, making sense in a situation of
choice, he was describing. So his next step was to make the
intelligibility of texts problematic. This is shown in the
first part of his article 'Speaking Seriously'' in Theory and
Society. After that, influenced by the writings of Marx,
Heidegger and Barthes, he became concerned with that which the
text or any other activity exemplifies,-a form of life, a mode
of production. According to David Silverman man has to search
for these very beginnings, to start thinking.

In this interview David Silverman dwells upon his changes in
thought and its causes. Particularly his ideas of this moment
are given special attention. The interview was held the morning
after Silverman's lecture at the Amsterdam Festival of Social
Sciences, april 19th in the lounge of the American Hotel in
Amsterdam.

Positivism.
IM: I think, like the most of us, you have had a positivistic
training.
DS: Yes, you're right about the positivistic background. I did
my undergraduate work at the London School of Economics and out
of that I got interested in the usual problems, like 'how do
people in different social classes behave'. Then I went to Los
Angeles to do a master's degree. I was very little changed in
studying there. I think the one who influenced me the most in

★ Text authorized by David Silverman.

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L.A. was John Horton. This was the middle sixties and the big thing in the sociology of those days was conflict and consensus. So I was reading Dahrendorf and Horton's own stuff. Then I got hold of a book by D.Lockwood that was published in 1958, called The Blackcoated Worker, which was an attempt to understand why these workers had not behaved as wage labourers, had exhibited false consciousness and had been appeared to be anti-union at least in Britain, and to be commisted to individualistic ideologies. So when I came back to the London School of Economics I started out my Ph.D. on a study of white collar ideologies. I had a lovely two-by-two research design. I took four different research settings: two where white collar workers had good prospects of promotion and two where they didn't have those prospects. The other variable was whether they had contact with manual workers at work. I hypothesized certain kinds of relationships between having prospects of promotion, contact with manual workers, claims to status ideologies, and being individualist or collectivist in orientation. It was a traditional questionnaire study and I administered the questionnaires. As I was going through the completed questionnaires, two kind of things were happening. First of all I was struck by the way in which I had failed to take account, it seemed then, of the meanings which these variables had for the people concerned. I assumed that people want promotion, but why should they necessarily? But maybe I was just a bad positivist and I should have had also questioned how they defined the situation themselves. More fundamental was the freedom I experienced in coding the responses to the open-ended questions. One day I coded one way and another day I coded another way. It was quite elating the freedom at first, but after a while I was brought face to face with a kind of guided character to what I was doing. And what I was doing was more a comment on my own practices, than a comment on what I was ostensibly talking about. So to this day there are 150 relatively unanalysed questionnaires lying around in my home and that was the end of that.

At that point I started to get back into Weber, from whom I originally started but who, up to then, I'd been reading only in terms of his classifications, in terms of his substantive work on class and status and so on.

IM: You were not influenced by books or men in your environment?

DS: Not at that time, this would be '67, '68, but certainly later. I also at that time became responsible for teaching a course in industrial sociology, which made me have to wade through the literature, particularly the literature on the sociology of organizations. I started from zero and was struck by the fact how little there was there in the sociology of organizations. There were certain kinds of theoretical bases, deriving from systems models, deriving from functionalist models, which very much seemed to fit an administrative managerial ideology. Much of the work can be seen in those terms.

Iterpretative Sociology

IM: What did you do with it?

DS: I started re-working the material on organizations based on
a critique of systemsthinking, which I then identified with
positivism and on a concern with social action. A concern
with the meaningful character of the social world in a way
in which sense arises in the attribution of meanings, in
a way in which in order to understand an action we have to
see the kind of game in which it is located for the actor
as a part of his tactics and his strategy.

IM: So that was your start in interpretative sociology?

DS: That's right. Out of that became my reworked Ph.D. thesis
which became published as The Theory of Organizations, which
broadly is a kind of review of the literature of organizati-
ons as an exemplification of systemsthinking, and a perspec-
tive deriving, as I thought, from Max Weber. Then the pers-
pective shifts again.

Ethnomethodology

IM: What happened?

DS: Maybe I came across Garfinkel's book, but found it unintelli-
gible. Then I saw some stuff by Cicourel and that made more
sense.

IM: Method and Measurement in Sociology?

DS: Yes, that one and The Social Organization of Juvenile Justice.
I've also been back to L.A.. I didn't meet Garfinkel. I got
so far as going to his door and knocking on it. I did talk
to others, particularly Mell Pollner. Then I came back to
England and then Cicourel himself came over in '71.
Before then I'd been having conversations with colleagues
at Goldsmith's who were into Husserl and Schutz and who got
me interested. So I began to read in that kind of area. By
the time that Cicourel came over, I had some kind of back-
ground in phenomenology and had some notion of what a pheno-
menological sociology might look like. From the stimulating
series of seminars we had with Cicourel, I came to find out
about the work being done in ethnomethodology and to appre-
ciate the way in which, at that time, it seems to differ
very considerably from the kind of work being done in, say,
symbolic interactionism. I worked through the notion of ma-
king the social world a topic as well as a resource, actually
manage to read Garfinkel for the first time, and also to read
quite a lot of unpublished papers that Cicourel brought over
at that time. Out of that emerged a series of lectures given
by several of us of Goldsmith's: Michael Phillipson, Paul
Filmer, David Walsh, and myself. Out of that, with Cicourel's
help, came New Directions in Sociological Theory.

IM: From this book I understood there was some empirical research
forthcoming from you?

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DS:Yes, I got started on one. I managed to raise money and I
   did a study over two or three years on a large Britisch public
   sector organization.
   I wanted to begin with natural settings and with natural con-
   versations as it arose in those settings. Luckily the orga-
   nization let me in to tape record routine things that went
   on there. So we recorded selection interviews and after that
   were using Cicourel's technique of indefinite triangulation
   of accounts. That is to say that after the interaction had
   occurred we went back with the taperecorder to the people
   concerned, individually, and said 'well, look, tell me what
   was going on there'? Then later on we took them back to the
   first tape, started to play it and said 'look, if you think
   there is something you feel I should know happening there,
   tell me', and then we taperecorded what was said. We took
   some of these comments back to other people, so it was all
   being triangulated from one person to the next. We did also
   take tapes of selection interviews to each individual selec-
   tor after three months and asked him what he did remember
   of his interview with that candidate. Many didn't remember
   a thing. After playing the tape but before coming to a ver-
   dict on whether the candidate was selected or not, they told
   us their verdict and sometimes they would be wrong. So the
   sense of what has happened is seen in its out come. Once you
   know the outcome, the past is rewritten in terms of it.
IM:The same finding as in Garfinkel's 'Some Rules of Correct
   Decisions that Jurors Respect'?
DS:That's right. You got all the features of practical decision
   making arising in there so that it doesn't become useful
   to talk about some kind of system of rules or norms which
   produce the decision. All one can talk about is the way in
   which decisions are made observable-reportable, accountable,
   intelligible, and so on.
   So we had all these and other materials and there's our problem.
   We had about 50 hours of tape and we had to do something with
   it. Practically what we did, we played it a first time and
   then lots of things would strike us and we made a lot of
   notes. But then we looked at the notes and felt dissatisfied
   with them, because we were reading an underlying pattern in
   the same way as the people concerned were reading an under-
   lying pattern. So we stopped that, played the tapes again
   and nothing occurred to us.

Making the obviousness problematic.

IM:You were looking for another approach?
DS:Yes, what we gradually tried to do was to make the obvious-
   ness which the tapes had for us, problematic, rather than
   sort of trade off that obviousness. To ask ourselves how it
   could be recognizably obvious.

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IM:That is very phenomenological.
DS:Right, it is in the tradition of phenomenology.
   Now moving on to were that took me, I have to refer to the
   papers that were in <u>Theory and Society</u>, 'Speaking Seriously'.
   The first part of that paper showed broadly where I've got
   by trying to make the obviousness problematic. So rather than
   ask why certain people got promoted or not, I tried to make
   the topic how the talk was being assembled such, that some-
   thing could be recognized as happening in the setting. So
   I came up with this version of how we talk to each other in
   order to provide for that talk as recognizable serious, as
   not chatter, as not gossip and so on. So I produced this
   account. I said, it seems to me that in order to speak
   seriously one must attend to the problem of bias. Bias be-
   comes an issue and one must show that one is trying to mini-
   mize it where ever possible and show that one is properly
   rule guided. Not that one is a mere automaton being deter-
   mined by rules, one is not a machine. Quite the contrary,
   one is reading the rules in term's of common sense know-
   ledge of social structures.
IM:You're not only speaking about the bureaucratic community
   but also about the scientific community?
DS:That's right. But here is a problem. What was the claim to
   seriousness of my own account? Now this can be seen as step-
   ping down into the infinite regress; I took it to be not
   this sort of epistemological problem, but a problem of, to
   put it dramatically, living my life.
   That is to say, if in one's speech, in a Wittgensteinian
   sense, one is engaging oneself in a language game, that
   language game has its bedrock, a form of life, a mode of
   existence. Now in describing the language game of bureau-
   crats, it would follow that I could only be exemplifying
   the language game of description.
IM:Your description or the descriptions of the people you're
   studying?
DS:Both. They become one and the same. Lets say my claim to
   seriousness now becomes located in an attempt to offer an
   account of what they are doing, while I'm trying to seperate
   myself from my account, trying to persuade you that that was
   really going on in the setting, offering myself as interchange-
   able with you such that you can change places and see the
   same thing in the materials. So you come away from my account
   of speaking seriously, saying 'yes, that's right', or 'no,
   I think things are done rather differently'.
   Now, it was out of that, I think, that I came to recognize
   that this issue was much more than a epistomological problem.
   Involved were a whole range of sociological approaches wich
   now seemed no longer different.That what ethnomethodology
   now seemed to me to be doing, was to be offering just another
   version of positivism. So there was a steady increase of
   what I came to define as positivism. At the start what was

positivistic was what Weber was opposed to, later it be-
came sociologies of meaning, now it became the descripti-
vist project itself as exemplified in the whole range of
these approaches in interpretative sociology. The issue
became now, what was their form of live, what was their
mode of existence, which supported them.

Reading and writing as a mode of live

IM:So, you're saying, all those positivistic sociologists are
members of the same language game, all members of the same
social organization?

DS:Yes, but the membership arises not because they happen to
be members, we are all members of that organization too,
but that their writing was attaching them to that membership.
They found themselves in that membership. Wittgenstein talks
about 'finding your feet in a certain language game', that's
how they came to recognize themselves.
So, what to do? At that point I started to re-read Marx. Be-
fore then there had not been any kind of serious engagement
with him by me. But in reading Marx again, this time I was
struck by the way in which his reading of other peoples work
is not in terms of the way in which their work represents
an advance on other people, the way in which it has certain
limitations of fact or of approach, but rather he wants to
read their work as a confession. He refers to the political
economists as confessing their modes of existence. Again,
when he talks about Proudhon, it's not that Proudhon has
got it wrong but that he has got it right. Proudhon is
exemplifying the very alienated society that he is ostensibly
describing. And that too I began to find in Weber. Reading
Weber, to some extent as Marcuse does, as doing irony, as
asking 'this is what we call reason'?, rather then read him
substantively, in terms of saying 'this is what we call
reason, this is it and here are my types'. Showing that this
irony is in the very character of his own writing. The charac-
ter of his own writing as fated by that mode of rationality,
as unable to be anything else as a confession of what it is
to be located at this particular point in time, at this
particular culmination of the western tradition. And so
asking in this reading, asking the reader, to wrench forth
from Weber's words a confession to which those words could
only point.
Now that being fated could be seen to fit in with the tradi-
tional sociology of knowledge, where one looks at the way in
which certain historical epochs produce various kinds of
writings. But I don't read writing or any activity in that
kind of way; to read it as a confession is to read it as
showing not only the historically and socially located
character of the writing, but also its historically and
socially locating character. The French semiologist Roland

Barthes calls writing an act of socio-historical solida-
rity. I think what he is trying to point towards there is
a version of writing which reworks, reproduces modes of
production. Modes of production which are to be found always
already in the authors text. Not to be seen as something
merely upon which the author's text reports upon, but which
his writing very much exemplifies.

IM:Has this to be necessarily the same mode of production for
the same writer in different times or for different writers
in the same time?

DS:That is always open. When I say the writer writes in his time,
I mean one finds oneself in an particular kind of location.
Wittgenstein talks about 'what one is tempted to say', at
different times, at different societies, one is tempted to
say different things, but he says that this temptation in
the theoretic life is to be overcome or is at least to be
made the issue around which the writing circles. So the cha-
racter of the theoretic life is that one seeks to. adress,
at least begins from, what one is tempted to say in order
to ask about the form of life in which one could be tempted
to say that in so doing to exemplify another form of life
another mode of speaking. The mode of speaking of our age
is that of the functionary, is that of the rationality where
the claim to seriousness arises in forgetting one's begin-
nings.
That in a very round-about way is why I can no longer fit
myself within the phenomenological tradition in as far as
it seems to be in a way the apotheosis of that fate, of
that temptation, the notion of the attempt to presuppo-
sitionesness. The attempt to bracket, for me now, reso-
nates with the mode of the market, with the individual
who for the sake of the market and for the proper operation
of market forces, strips himself of all tradition, of all
commitments, so that a proper type of commodity price can
emerge. So the way in which I read Husserl now, is, as
Heidegger does in the beginnings of Being and Time, as not
offering an alternative to the tradition of western meta-
physics, but as being the culmination of it, in terms of
the rootless individual, which is indeed the mode through
which we live our lives on the market. Think in this res-
pect of the fact that Husserl himself locates part of what
he is doing in Descartes and Descartes in turn can be located
as the exemplification of the mode of the subject,the mode
of the individual.

IM:But, you're not thinking you're out of the scientific
community?

DS:What I want to try and understand is the way in which writing,
especially my writing, is tempted to begin from that scien-
tific community in order to make me remember the kind of
claims that that community makes. I want to hear that scien-
tific community where it is traded off as a beginning for

speaking; what Heidegger calls the mathematical project, an attempt to dominate and to master the world, an attempt to use language as a commodity in a world where everything becomes a commodity. So to answer your question, I have to say that the meaningful response from me would not be in terms of what my values were, whether I said 'yes' or 'no' to your question, but would be to see the answers always already contained within my texts, in the kind of claims that it made about its intelligibility. So one is scientific not because one intends to be a scientist, but one is scientific by the claim to seriousness that is found in one's text. That is why Heidegger refers to his project as thinking; and he wants to separate thinking from science in so far as science claims te be self-grounding and so cut off from metaphysics and so unable to think, unable to circle around its beginnings, but always having to go on, to accumulate more and more knowledge in its domination and its mastering.

IM: You did mention Heidegger, Marx en Barthes. Were you also influenced by modern sociologists?

DS: Yes, a couple of years after Cicourel came over, we were lucky to have Peter McHugh (and later Alan Blum) who visited Goldsmith's for a year as a visiting professor. At that time, quite frankly, much of what they were saying made very little sense to me. We had to think and that was hard. I think it was doubly hard because what was going on seemed to us to assume a background that most of us didn't have at the time. So what that essentially provided me with, was a stimulus to read. Out of that I read Wittgenstein, out of that I read Heidegger, out of that I read Marx. Then I could come to concern myself with the kind of issue that I've been suggesting.

I was also helped by, and this was branching me away from the other people at Goldsmith's and I think from McHugh too, by my reading of the work of some French writers. I found in them, particularly Roland Barthes, Jean Ricardou and Julia Kristeva, the attempt to come to grips with the methodic character of writing as already organized, not as the outcome of anything, not as the outcome of a technique, not as the outcome of a particular society, but as representing a mode of production that is always already present in the text. What I found particularly interesting in their work is that for them this is not being done in any sense as a solipsistic exercise. I'm not suggesting this is true with other's people's work, but what is nice about their work, is the way in which the engagement which it represents for them is an engagement with modes of social production, is an act of socio-historical solidarity. I'm not saying that engagement is something that arises by studying particular things by bringing certain values to the text. That version what it is to be engaged is already protected by positivism.

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The version of engagement the French writers are representing is the engagement which is always already present in the text, always already present in the claim to intelligibility, always present in the form of life which the writer and the reader recollects through their activities of reading and writing. So when I talk about violent reading, I don't have in mind a sort of solipsistic act of a sort of isolated individual, because to see things in that kind of way is significant not for what is seen but for the way of seeing which it represents, for the mode of existence which it commits the viewer to.

IM:In the past you've studied members meanings or you have studied the meaning process, now in some way you can escape from those problems there are involved by making the topic the writers text. So then you seek to produce a faithful account of the writers text to understand that which motivates it or that what is to be found in it. And that is the end of the matter and in some way you have escaped the epistemological problems involved.

DS:I'm not trying to offer a switch of topic, I'm not suggesting that the seriousness of writing, of acting, arises not in what we say, not in what we talk about, but arises in what our words and acts show, what they point towards, make reference to.

IM:So we have, like Carlos Castaneda, to look in holes to see something else?

DS:Yes, in a sense. It would appear that words were things and that the only alternative was silence or nothing. Heidegger talks about no-thing. What that implies is that our words (which are things) make reference to something which is not an absense, but something other than a thing. What is other than a thing is the the faithful character of our speech as it engages with the tradition. What is other than a thing is ourselves. So the aim becomes to write in such a way as to encourage violent readings. After my lecture 'Reading Castaneda' somebody was saying to me 'now look I'm very disappointed, you really haven't talked too much about Castaneda about whom I wanted to hear more'. Now I take it that that kind of concern exemplifies what we call rationality, where the seriousness of speech derives from being faithful to its topic. But what makes its topic possible, what makes its speaker possible? Those are to me the serious issues. One's talking becomes an opportunity for dialoque, an opportunity to hear what is always present in the speech, to hear its methodic character, which the speaker cannot formulate. You cannot formulate no-thing because it would be no-thing which makes possible that formulation.

IM:Are thing and no-thing in the sense of Heidegger in a way analogous to the notion of content and relation as one can find in the work of Watzlawick Pragmatics of Human Communications?

DS:Well I don't know this man's work, but one of the tasks has
   to be that of re-thinking classifications like content and
   relation. You know, all the time we are tempted, I'm exem-
   plifying this as much as everybody else, to classify in
   these kinds of ways. Levy-Strauss says there is something
   basic about these binary structures that we're engaged in
   re-producing. Maybe we need te re-think what we're tempted
   to say. The urge to classify is an escape from thinking,
   it's to seek to master a topic and to avoid that what always
   masters one's attempt to grasp that topic.
IM:Do you have a name for this kind of work? I know it is the
   same kind of question, in the same tradition, as the one be-
   fore.
DS:Yes, but in a way that wouldn't matter because the French
   writers did just that themselves. They talk about 'semana-
   lyse'. Their tradition is a way of escaping from the work
   of De Saussure and escaping from the distinction between
   the signifier and what is signified in order to recognize
   that what is signified is always present within the sign,
   and to show the unreflexive character of that kind of
   distinction. I'm happiest with the name 'thinking'.

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