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ETHNOGRAPHIES OF REASON

Eric Livingston. Aldershot & Burlington: Ashgate, 2008, xi, 270pp. £55.00
[\$115.00?] (hardback)

A review can only go so far. Usually, the reviewer is confined to either giving the flavour, or else repeating the substance, of the book in question. In this case, I'm necessarily confined to the flavour. Not because *Ethnographies of Reason* has no substance; rather because it abounds with so many different substances. Even after two careful readings of its 270 pages laid out in an 8pt font, I'm at a loss to offer any cheap and nasty content summary. Any, perhaps all, of its 28 main chapters could easily have been a book-length study in its own right.

What's being investigated here is just a small subsection of the myriad possible forms of reasoning and skills necessary for getting specific social tasks done. Without them, social tasks simply don't *get* done and anything we might (under any conceivable circumstance) recognise as "society" disappears. So *Ethnographies of Reason* is sociology, but not quite as we know it. However, as I will argue later, it *is* sociology, *tout court*, and what we currently know or think that discipline to be is not.

The best way in would be to keep the book closed for a while and go out and find a draughts/checkers/*jeu de dames* set. They're cheap and you can buy them anywhere. Toyshops even. But if you thought draughts was child's play, set your pieces as per Figure 1.1 (p. 3):

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Think hard about how black can win this game. Experiment. Make some *sketches* (ch. 20) of your reasoning. It's not easy is it?

Now you can open the book, armed still with your board and pieces, and read through (or rather, *see*) Livingston's ethnographic work on the work and skill of reasoning in draughts. What you see is that the apparently most ordinary (and, for some, trivial) thing in the world, exhibits incredible methodic properties.

So this isn't formal, logical, universal reason – the kind you learned in maths or philosophy (ch. 2): it's reasoning that's specific to the social domain of draughts. And it's *ipso facto* social, whether you're playing against an actual opponent or solving a draughts puzzle set by someone else. (So I expect not to hear the argument from solipsism here.) As Livingston writes: "Reasoning in checkers isn't a form of universal reasoning that's applied to the play of checkers; it's a type of reasoning indigenous to, living within, and sustained by the practices of

crossboard play” (p. 8). He calls this “reasoning in the wild” – presumably as opposed to the logician’s tame variety – and he makes it his exhaustive job to give us precise ethnographic descriptions of this “wild” object. As any decent anthropologist should, having discovered his or her unique subject of investigation.

If you work in this way, you will, I promise, want to go on to look at the multiple other forms of practical reason in the book and, interestingly, you won’t if you merely sit down for a read through, unprepared to *engage* in the practical activities under investigation. As Srikant Sarangi tells us, “thick description” requires “thick participation” (*Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 2(3), 2005). Expect then to work through and, in so doing, *find* some details of the specifically social practices of doing jigsaws and crosswords, constructing mathematical proofs, conducting chemical experiments, driving in traffic, supermarket shopping, working with prisms For a quick tour, if you must, see Livingston’s remarkable synopsis in another place (*Journal of Pragmatics* 40(1), 2008). But even there, don’t forget your kit!

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There will inevitably be a certain response here: it’s ethnomethodology, so we can just forget all about it. But, significantly perhaps, the word “ethnomethodology” – let alone any declaration of allegiance to it – does not appear in the book if we, as we perhaps should, ignore the title of the series in which it is published. As even Garfinkel himself once famously said: “whoever wants the term [‘ethnomethodology’], for whatever you want it for, go ahead and take it” (in R. Turner (ed), *Ethnomethodology*, London, Penguin, 1974, p. 18). The term doesn’t matter one jot. Even if it did, there are very few Australian sociologists (including our resident “conversation analysts” who identify with the more mechanistic forms of applied linguistics) who have any idea whatsoever of what ethnomethodology is or does. And the shambles of a description in our only

current pseudo-local textbook doesn't help (R. Van Krieken et al, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, Pearson, Sydney, 2006, pp. 661-664).

What matters is that this book, if anything in the last half-century does, gives us a radical re-footing of what *sociology* might be. If every tribe has its totem, every discipline has its "ToTheM": To(pics), The(ories) and M(ethods). From its inception, sociology has been short on originality in all three departments. Much could be said about theories and methods in this respect – and Livingston's book has extensive implications for them both. My own, perhaps idiosyncratic, conclusion from it is that theory is no more than method in drag – but that is very much beside the point.

What is to the point is that we have here a set of *topics* unique to a possible sociology. The usually suspected pathways (class, race, gender ... etc. etc.) are not only effects of what Livingston calls an undue interest in "the hidden social order" (ch. 14), they are also perfectly well trodden by other disciplines; politics and economics in particular. Livingston's proposal that sociology turn instead to "the witnessable social order" offers an entirely new set of topics that we might term "socio-logics": the precise ways in which "mundane expertise" (p. 129) operates such that, as the phrase has it, social order is possible in the first place.

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