



Volume 13 Issue 4
13/2015
tamarajournal.com

Organisational Ethnography And The Question Of Power: Dialogue, Conceptualisation and The Gadamer – Habermas Debate

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Keywords

Ethnography

Power

Domination

Conceptualisation

*Gadamer – Habermas
debate*

Abstract

When doing any kind of ethnography we are always confronted with questions of power and domination. In this article the problem is dealt with through an analysis of the debate between Gadamer and Habermas. In the late 1960es and the early 1970es they exchanged a series of essays and articles where they discussed the status of power and domination in relation to understanding (hermeneutics) in particular and to the social sciences in general. I will use some of the arguments from this debate and confront them with the an ethnographic method called the conceptualising method (Henriksen et al, 2004), as I find that the role of power and domination discussed in this ancient debate also counts for the conceptualising method in particular and in any ethnography in general.

“I agree with Habermas that a hermeneutic fore-understanding is always in play and that it therefore requires reflexive enlightenment. But that is as far as I go with "critical rationality" because I consider perfect enlightenment illusory”. (Gadamer, 1992, p. 555)

Introduction

Ethnography is about learning from and of people and their life worlds. When ethnography met the world of organisation, business and management the question of power became even more important. Important because, no matter how we conceptualise power – power is always a constitutive element of any organisation in a modern capitalist society (Jørgensen et al, 2015). Keeping this in mind, our theories and methods should capture and reflect that.

In this paper I shall investigate the question of power in relation to theories and methods in ethnographic studies of modern organisations. With an outset in the actor reality approach - with its theory of reality and its conceptualising method (Henriksen et al, 2004) - I intend to show that such methods *are* able to capture the ever-important question of power. This is done through an analysis of the Gadamer-Habermas debate where the question of power was one of the main vehicles of that debate. The results of the analysis are then referred to the question of power in debates of ethnographic studies of organisations in general and more specifically to the conceptualising method.

The conceptualising method

The conceptualising method is a social science research method, based on language, language development and dialogue between actors. The idea is, through dialogue between the actors involved, to develop new concepts to hitherto unknown phenomena and through that solve the problems that these new or unknown phenomena cause.

The conceptualising method (Nørreklit, 1978; Henriksen, 2004) has a background in hermeneutics and it has an emphasis on actors, action, language and story and narratives. The basic features are a theory of reality and a conceptualising method. Actors and researchers jointly, through dialogues, create new or revitalise old concepts, in order to better understand social phenomena and the problems in everyday settings.

At this place some colleagues would argue that the conceptualising method has no means to handle power in the process as the conceptualising method is neglecting the fact that the process of conceptualising is a power game. The very noble ideas of dialogue is just a very naïve illusion, the stronger part will always be the one that is determining the outcome of the conceptualising process. Such criticism could be based on a Habermasian or Foucauldian perspective and could, for a large part, be justified. Already Marx informed us ‘the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas’ (Marx, 1970). So, the quest for power is not new and should not be neglected in any social science theory and any social science method. Power is a constitutive part of society and the theories and methods that attempt to understand any social matter should of cause reflect that. Rightly so, and in this paper I will argue that the conceptualising method is very much concerned with and very well equipped to deal with the question of power. I will confront this problem of power and domination through an analysis of the debate between Gadamer and Habermas. In the late 1960es and the early 1970es they exchanged a series of essays and articles where they discussed the status of power and domination in relation to understanding (hermeneutics) in particular and to the social sciences in general. I will use some of the arguments from this debate and confront them with the conceptualising method as I find that the role of power and domination discussed in this ancient debate also counts for the conceptualising method.

The conceptualising method and power

The actor reality approach, with its theory of reality and its conceptualising method, is based on the idea that every actor has a reality, a worldview, horizon or what we want to call it. The idea is that every actor has a certain way of understanding the world, experiencing the world, and consequently each individual actor has his or her ideas of what is facts about the world, what logics operates in the world, what values this is based on and how all this is communicated (Henriksen et al, 2004).

Already in the theory of reality, power is an integrated part of the dimension ‘values’ (Henriksen et al, 2004, Chapter 6, Values, power and organisation). Power is here based on a foucauldian notion of power; without power (or force) nothing would change. It is our ability to want to change (values) and our ability to carry the change through (power or force) that makes changes possible at all. So far so good; the theory of reality *do* hold an idea of power. The problem then is the method. The conceptualising method is based on a dialogue between actors (e.g. organisation members) and observants (researchers). This dialogue cannot be an ideal speech situation, because power and interests will inevitably, always, distort it. Or will it? This is the question addressed here. The Foucauldians and the Habermasians will claim that this is always the case, but I am not so sure. First of all, because we got to believe that dialogue or the ideal speech situations are possible, even if only on very rare occasions. And secondly even through a not-so-ideal speech situation, it would be possible to conceptualise, solve problems and analyse social matters. This however, need some qualification, so, in the following I will shed some light on the question of power and domination in the conceptualising method through an analysis of the Gadamer-Habermas debate, as the arguments put forward in this debate are very relevant to this question of power and domination in the conceptualising method in particular and in ethnographic method in general.

The Gadamer - Habermas debate

In *Truth and Method* Gadamer (1992) argues that in order to understand something we are subject to prejudice, tradition (Überlieferung), authority and the fusion of horizons. This is rather controversial if we think enlightenment and modernity. If enlightenment and modernity is characterised by their scientism, anti-traditionalism and rationality (Schanz, 2004; Henriksen, 2010) it sounds like a very provocative statement to claim that understanding is based on prejudice, authority and tradition and not on scientific methods. This was exactly also where Habermas reacted.

After Gadamer had published *Truth and Method*, he later published ‘The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem’ (1966), an article where he stressed that hermeneutics is a philosophy concerned with *all* kinds of understanding, hence it’s universality, and not just a method for the human and social sciences. It is a general philosophy, not a method.

Habermas opened the debate when he published *On the logic of the social sciences*. In this book Habermas investigates the condition for the social sciences in general, but he also finds place to make some insightful considerations about hermeneutics, and especially Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (Habermas, 1967, (1988), pp. 143).

Even if Gadamer and Habermas have different points of departure – hermeneutics and critical theory - they agree on several points, which Habermas also points out in his critique. First of all they agree that language is essential for the understanding of man. Even more so that 'the being that can be understood is language' ('Sein das verstanden werden kann ist Sprache'). This means that not only is language essential for the understanding of man, but language is what makes man human. Language is a question of ontology. Secondly they agree that the interpreter is part of the interpretation process. Positivist objectivity is not possible and Haraway's 'modest witness' (Haraway, 1997) is not an option. Thirdly, they also agree that dialogue is important, whether we call it a dialogue, ideal speech situation or something else, dialogue is necessary for understanding. Finally they agree that prejudices are important, whether we call it prejudices or knowledge interests.

Where they disagree is on the following points. First, there is the question of tradition and rationality. The young generation will not necessarily follow in the footsteps of the older generation and by the aid of rational thinking we are able to break away from traditions. There are possibilities for disrupting the tradition; the handing down process (Überlieferung) that is tradition is not necessarily a smooth process and rational thinking is also a possibility. Secondly, there is, according to Habermas, a problem with Gadamer's concepts authority and prejudice. Gadamer points to the authority of a good book or a good teacher who actually knows, but this authority has all too often been misused to exercise power and to suppress. Habermas again points to rational thinking as the mean to undermine this kind of misuse of authority. In the same manner should reflection and reason undermine prejudices that all too often keep false assumptions alive. Finally, Habermas is critical towards the role Gadamer grants language. There are, according to Habermas, other important institutions in society, like labour and division of work and domination. These institutions cannot be reduced to linguistics and the strong emphasis on language consequently ends in a kind of linguistic idealism. In sum Habermas recognises hermeneutics' ability to act as a method in the parts of humanities and history, but in other sciences, like the social sciences, other more critical methods are needed.

Gadamer's first response to this is found in his article called 'Rhetoric, hermeneutics and the critique of ideologies' (Gadamer, 1967, 1988). In this he once again stresses the universality of hermeneutics. When he, in *Truth and Method*, was concerned with art and history, it was just to illustrate how hermeneutics can work - they were examples. This, however, does not mean that hermeneutics cannot be applied to any other area. Hermeneutics is still universal. In the article Gadamer examines rhetoric as a model for hermeneutics, first because rhetoric, as hermeneutics, is universal and secondly, because rhetoric holds a kind of rationality that is open to possibilities – and not, like scientific rationality, seeks proof. According to Gadamer, Habermas and with him rationalism and critical theory, fails to see the kind of rationality that opens possibilities and is solely focused on a specific kind of rationality. This discussion of the role of rationality becomes pivotal for the debate. Gadamer holds that Habermas is too concerned with an enlightenment version of rationality and he creates a false dichotomy between rationality and tradition. Habermas fails to see that e.g. a scientist can contribute to the scientific tradition through a critical (rational) stance towards that tradition and thereby keep the tradition alive and develop it. In addition to this the concept of rationality that operates in Habermas critique, is a very dubious one. It would require that there should exist some kind of universal rationality outside of human existence and this (universal) rationality should be applicable to any human circumstance. Secondly, there is the question of the role of language. Habermas, very rightly, maintains that domination and division of labour is a given fact in the human world. Also that domination and division of labour operates independently of language and, at the same time, have a huge influence on our interpretations (hermeneutics). But, how would Habermas learn and know about domination and division of labour if it was not for language? If we want to analyse, know about, criticise, discuss, confront, change etc. domination and division of labour, we would be handed out to language. If we wanted to criticise and analyse the impact of domination and division of labour on our interpretations we would again be handed out to language. Without communication of our findings, how should we know? Finally, there is the question of authority. Habermas is making a false assumption, a dichotomy, about emancipation and authority. We can have authoritative knowledge, some knowledge is better than other, and we even need authoritative knowledge if we want to emancipate and do something about domination.

In 1970 Habermas published yet another round in the debate. In 'Hermeneutics claim to universality' he once again discussed the universality of hermeneutics, this time through a lengthy description of psychoanalysis as a model for the social sciences. Habermas' idea was that the social sciences should act, in society, in the same way as psychoanalysis acts

for a patient, by uncovering unconscious pathologies, e.g. effects of domination and division of labour, that hermeneutics cannot uncover. Habermas begins his article with a description of science as a non-linguistic endeavour. In the sciences the scientist is studying the matter of concern directly, in a monologic fashion, not in a dialogue with others and without the mediation of language. Language is first at play when the researcher wants to communicate his results to others. It seems as if Habermas thinks that interpreting data through a theory is no hermeneutic task. Then Habermas continues to describe how psychoanalysis can act as a model for the social sciences.

Gadamer's response to this is found in his essay 'Replik' published in Apel et al (1973). Gadamer rejects the idea of a special type of monological science (i.e. a science without language and dialogue), stating that any science is handed out to language and consequently holds a hermeneutic element to it. He then continues to reject the idea of psychoanalysis as a model for the social sciences. Asking if there is an analogy at all? The relationship between citizens is not to be compared to the relationship between doctor and patient and who is the doctor anyway? To be emancipated from mental illness is not the same as being emancipated from dictatorship.

Gadamer rounded up the debate, that at the time, 1972, seemed unresolved, in a postscript to the third edition of *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, 1992, pp. 551). Here he once again rejects Habermas arguments and repeats his own arguments, but he also acknowledges the importance of the debate and Habermas' important contribution to the debate.

“Clearly an essential issue is at stake here. Discussion of it has been conducted primarily between Habermas as the developer of "critical theory" on the one side and me on the other. On both sides it is agreed that ultimate, scarcely examined presuppositions come into play—though on the one side there is also the faith in "unconstrained dialogue," the ideal of Habermas and many others who follow the old Enlightenment slogan: to dissolve obsolete prejudices and overcome social privileges through thought and reflection. In this context Habermas makes the fundamental supposition of a "contra-factual agreement." On my side, by contrast, there is a deep scepticism about the fantastic overestimation of reason by comparison to the affections that motivate the human mind. When I considered the conflict between hermeneutics and ideology together with the powerful role played by rhetoric, this was no literary accident but instead a well-considered sketch of a thematic whole. Marx, Mao, and Marcuse—whose names are inscribed together on many walls these days—certainly do not have "unconstrained dialogue" to thank for their popularity”. (Gadamer, 1992, p. 567)

Gadamer gets the last word in the debate, even if he does not attempt to get the last word.

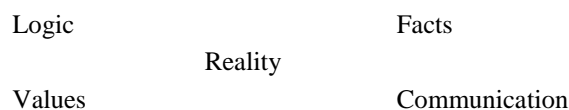
“But I will stop here. The ongoing dialogue permits no final conclusion. It would be a poor hermeneuticist who thought he could have, or had to have, the last word”. (Gadamer, 1992, p. 579)

More than forty years on, in hindsight, it is clear from the debate, that Habermas' emphasis on rationalism, science and critical thinking is perhaps too optimistic, if not naïve. In the time between the debate and now we have seen several other debates discussing the matter; post-modernism (Lyoyard, 1979), science debates (Haraway, 1997; Latour, 1991), a technological turn (Ihde, 1990) etc. and these debates on the status of science and rationality only confirms that Habermas' take on these matters is perhaps too uncomplicated and the belief in rational critique too simple. What still stands is his emphasis on power and domination. In the original debate the importance of this was recognised by Gadamer as a very important issue that is to be understood hermeneutically. With this we can sum up the debate in the following way: To understand something is to understand it hermeneutically. The understanding happens within a tradition, in German *Überlieferung*, that which is handed down. That is, our understanding is always happening within a certain tradition. Here we could see Habermas' understanding and critique of hermeneutics as part of an enlightenment tradition. In a hermeneutic sense Habermas' critical theory is a tradition – we have a tradition for emancipation and critical thinking. This tradition is very much alive, which can be seen from recent developments in the field of critical thinking (Honneth, 2003). Next, the question of authority. If authority was 'emancipations other' we would not be able, with any authority, to claim that emancipation from tyranny (authority) is our goal. We will have to recognise some knowledge is better than other, that some prejudices are false and need to be changed with more and better, more authoritative, knowledge. Prejudices, or pre-knowledge, are necessary conditions for creating better and more authoritative knowledge, knowledge

that can emancipate. Critical theory's obsession with power and domination is a prejudice and a very productive one. But power and domination are still to be understood hermeneutically. Finally, we will have to recognise that there are more than one rationality (logic) operating in the world. We cannot rest on a single, scientific rationality. With this we could say that the hermeneutic concepts of tradition, authority, reason and the universal claim still stands and Habermas' original interpretation of the philosophical hermeneutics was misguided by the critical tradition and its false prejudice concerning hermeneutics. What was right, on the other hand, was the very important emphasis on power and domination, which in turn has to be understood hermeneutically.

The conceptualising method and power

The arguments put forward in the Gadamer Habermas debate above could just as well count for the conceptualising method, as it holds the same elements, as do philosophical hermeneutics. The conceptualising method is based on the idea that actors, jointly, create a language that is able to handle the problems in question. They do this through dialogues. In most cases real problems are problems we do not know how to handle, because we have no language that can deal with it - the concepts are missing. This language needs to be created, the concepts necessary for dealing with the problems need to be, well, yes, conceptualised. So, we have the same emphasis on language as hermeneutics. The conceptualising method is based on a theory of reality (Henriksen et al, 2004). This theory is concerned with the actor's individual and collective realities. Reality will here take on very specific meaning (Nørreklit, 2009, pp. 276). It is not the English (from Latin) word, reality, concerned with existing things (In Latin 'reas' means thing), but the Danish 'virkelighed' or German 'Wirklichkeit', which normally is translated into English as reality, but have a different meaning. 'Virkelighed' should, literally, be translated as 'that which works', this is not a thing, but a process of something that is working right, or working as intended. In this sense our concepts are real (virkelige), when they work as intended and are able to assist us in solving our problems. A reality then, is the worldview, horizon or what word we choose, that shows the actor the world and makes it possible for the actors to act in the world and to solve problems. There are, according to the theory of reality, four elements in this reality; logic, facts, values and communication and it is the purpose of the conceptualising method to develop these elements into a reality that works, are real.



As hermeneutics, the conceptualising method is concerned with different types of logic (rationality). That is, through the dialogues the actors discuss different kinds of logic, as these logics point to possibilities in the future. While Habermas seem to be focusing on one specific kind of logic (rationality)¹, the conceptualising method, like Gadamer, find that different types of logic exists, and it is exactly the purpose of the dialogue to disclose the logic that can help the actors solve their problems. The conceptualising method is also concerned with facts. Through the dialogues, the actors find ways of talking about the kind of facts present in their problems. Facts are not just facts, but are negotiated and in this negotiation, in the dialogue, the actors find the facts necessary for solving their problems.

The third element in the theory of reality is values. Values show us what we like and what we do not like. Values also show us what we want to change. This is where power and domination comes in; we need the power (force) to change things and what we do not want is injustice and domination. If we were powerless we were unable to do something about it. The problem is now if that is possible through dialogues between actors? This is the place where we can return to the Gadamer - Habermas debate, because the same arguments are put forward here. Is it so that power and domination will distort the dialogues and, behind the backs of the actors lure them into false assumptions and false consciousness? Consequently we need other means to disclose exactly that (Habermas' argument). Or, is language, dialogue and

¹ In the Gadamer-Habermas debate, maybe, but in later writings Habermas discussed rationality in a much more nuanced way (see Habermas, 1986, cap 2)

conceptualisation, precisely the means we need in order to disclose the values (e.g. power and domination) that operates in the matter of concern (Gadamer's argument).

If we want to disclose power and dominance, we can argue with Gadamer that we are handed out to language. We can only talk about it and try to disclose and conceptualise the circumstances we do not want to accept and we want to change. But what about the dialogue process itself? Is it really so, that we are subject to power games that we do not even see or hear? Based on the above we can see that we are and the only way to disclose and conceptualise and eventually change such power games is through dialogue and a conceptualisation process. The ideal speech situation will only happen or be possible on certain special occasions. But the dialogue, the ideal speech situation, is an ideal and it should always be in social research, as it is the only way we can disclose and conceptualise the values operating in social settings. Therefore there is a seemingly paradox found in the Gadamer – Habermas debate, that we can only disclose power games through the dialogue and this paradox is a basic condition for the social sciences.

Conclusions

The Gadamer – Habermas debate is a classic in continental philosophy and social science and it definitely still have relevance to anyone concerned with the social sciences. The questions of power and domination are ever-present in the social settings and should consequently be part of any social research. Through the conceptualising method it is possible to disclose this.

It can also disclose what would count as facts and how these facts are established. To state that some thing is a fact is a very powerful way of exercising domination. Likewise is it a very powerful way to dominate to claim that there is one type of rationality operating in a social setting, or to point to certain possibilities (logic, rationality); e.g. if a special kind of scientific or economic rationality is claimed to be the only logic possible. The kind of logic (rationality) and the kind of facts that operate in a social setting should consequently be part of any social analysis and consequently analysed as means of power and domination. The conceptualising method and the theory of reality deals with the question of power and domination in two ways. First there are the questions of values. Through the dialogues it is possible to disclose and conceptualise the values in question and through this also find traces of power and domination, as values are claims to power and domination. Secondly, there are the other dimensions of reality to claim that something is a fact or that a certain rationality (logic) operates in a social setting are power full statements, and should be analysed as such. Finally, it is obvious that communication is being used as means of power and domination. All this is disclosed through dialogues and can only be conceptualised through dialogues between actors.

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