

Caroline Knowles, visiting scholar, April 2011

Caroline Knowles, professor in sociology and the head of the Centre for Urban and Community Research at Goldsmiths, University of London, visited Center for Cultural Sociology in April 2011. She gave, together with Claire Alexander, PhD and reader in Sociology at the London School of Economics, a doctoral course on the topic “Researching ‘race’, migration and identities”. Knowles research focuses on race, ethnicity, whiteness, globalization, urban space, madness, visual, spatial and biographical methods.

How would you define your research?

- I suppose I study what you might think of as compositional aspects of globalization, particularly circulations of people and objects. I was initially interested people’s movements and circulations and then became interested in the objects that circulate with them. My last book was an object biography of a pair of flip-flop sandals. The general idea was to use the object to unpack the social life of the people and the skills, journeys and routes that go with the objects. So I went with an artist to Fuzhou in south-east China and we looked at the productions process of plastic shoes and then we followed the trail from there. It goes everywhere. But we followed it to one of China’s biggest emerging-markets in east-Africa, in Ethiopia. Africa is awash with Chinese plastic. This has environmental and all sorts of implications. So then we studied the impact of that in Addis Ababa. It gives people shoes who wouldn’t have shoes. And then we followed people around their daily lives and saw how people lived in that city – so the study is an apprehension of city lives through the people handling the object, the shoes, we followed. Anthropologists call this an object biography. Along the routes drawn by the flip-flops we encountered migrant workers in Chinese factories, and then rural to urban workers also in Ethiopia. The object provided a way of speaking about some of those people, journeys and processes.

I’ve been doing research on migration. I am interested in privileged migration particularly British out-migration, emigration, which is little studied. The book I did with photographer Douglas Harper on Hong Kong was a study of how British migrants live there. And now I am doing a new study, which I begun a little while ago, which is a study of how the British manage in Beijing. Beijing is not an excolonial space like Hong Kong, so I am interested in how they navigate it. I am interested how migrants do every-day life in landscapes of new

settlement. I am not so interested in their motivation – why they move – but how they live once they moved. I am also very interested in developing some research on something I came across in the Hong Kong study, which is how they think about Britain from afar. Because they have some very interesting views - often to do with ethnicity and race, which are about the ways in which British multi-racialism works. So I am interested in investigating some of those things.

How did you come to develop the idea of following objects?

- It comes from anthropology, Kopytoff who suggested what we might learn from tracing the biography of a car in Africa. He did not fully execute it but he suggested it. So the car was a way of understanding circulations of money. How did people get the money to buy the car? Who uses it? What relationships do they have to others? There is big area of interest in anthropology and material objects which I think is a quite rich and interesting culturally. So I wanted to tap into some of that and to use it. And also I noticed when I studied migrants that objects, of course, travel with people and some of them are very important. We found people in Hong Kong who had their objects still in storage in Britain 25 years later. So there is something interesting about objects and how people can, or cannot, let them go. And of course our lives are entangled with objects so they teach us a great deal about how people live. So really, I think objects are an entry point. I am always looking for entry points to tap a bit deeper into people's lives. And objects, I think, are one of those things.

And you have also collaborated with a professional artist ...

- Yes, Michel Tan he is a Singapore-based artist who also speaks mandarin so he was very useful, to work with him in China. He was one of my students on a MA-course we run at Goldsmiths called Photography and Urban Cultures. So not only was he a Chicago Art Institute trained artist he understood urban processes as well. So he was a very good person to work with. And we had exhibitions; we had an exhibition at the National Museum in Singapore of his photography and some words that I had put together and objects and so on.

What do you think photography can offer sociology?

- I think it adds all sorts of possibilities and extra sets of questions. It does the obvious thing like it adds descriptions. It provides an aesthetic sense of what things look like. But I think it also takes a snap-shot of the surface, at any moment in time, and sort of challenges us to explain how that was produced and what might be the bigger ramifications. I think it is very

much a micro-macro tool for examining things at different scales. It takes micro-scenes, but it challenges us to think beyond, into the macro – to ask how was this little thing, this microcosm produced? What social conditions made it possible? So photography is very much a C Wright Mills tool, I think so anyway.

How come that you chose to focus on privileged people?

- I think there are two reasons. I think the privileged are under-studied often in sociology – because we focus on the under-privileged. And I think there is, you know, we could leave the poor alone for a while and we could study the privileged. I think that the mechanisms of privileged and disadvantaged are probably the same, but with different outcomes. So we can study the same social processes, and we can study them from a different point of view. I also wanted to study privileged migration because the whole debate on migration in Britain is about migration into Britain, not out. And how we tolerate that. And whether those migrants fit in and assimilate. I think it is the same in Sweden. But if you turn the question around and you look at out-migration from Britain, there is never any attempt to assimilate or to join in. So I think it does question the focus on integration.

One last question, what is your impression from visiting Växjö and Sweden?

- It is a very good impression. I think that your students are well-read. They are very serious scholars in a way in which British students are not always quite so mature and serious about scholarship. So, it does feel that they highly value scholarly tradition, they read, they seriously grapple with issues. And they seem to welcome outside intervention, which not everywhere does actually. So my impression is that Swedish PhD students are very outward looking and curious about other perspectives and other ways of thinking. I really enjoy it! Where you get to come somewhere lovely and discuss ideas which bright young people it is always a privilege. Thank you for inviting me.