
CONFERENCIA

Just do it: The social is us (but is it ours)?

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Sociology came into existence by defining its own sphere of expertise: society, the social or social relations. But knowledge of the social has never been the monopoly of sociologists alone. Recently, for example, Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook founder, claimed that: ‘‘If you look five years out, every industry is going to be rethought in a social way’ (Gelles 2010). And alongside social media there are now also ‘social entrepreneurs’, ‘social networks’, ‘social innovation’ and so on. The long version of this paper looks at a range of contemporary devices and associated practices – the global brand Nike, Klout – a measure of influence in social media, and Facebook – to identify the challenge that is being posed today to sociology’s understanding of its proper subject matter: the social or social relations. But here I just focus on Nike, what I have called an open or new media object (Lury 2004).

I start by considering the claim that we are, today, experiencing not only an increase in the number of objects, but also a transformation in what an object is. Objects today, it is said, are incomplete, in the sense both of continually appearing in new versions, and also of being open or requiring participation by subjects to be completed. As Knorr Cetina (2009) puts it, objects now lack objectivity: they are not fixed or static but are constantly in a condition of transition and transformation. Indeed, she describes the relationality between subjects and objects in terms of an ongoing affinity between subjects conceived as structures of wanting and objects that are unfolding things. Similarly, the science fiction writer and cultural critic Bruce Sterling (2005) suggests that objects today can be understood as what he calls spime; he says, objects are ‘a set of relationships first and always, and an object now and then’ (2005: 77). Like Knorr Cetina, Sterling emphasizes the increasing significance of relating to objects: ‘I don’t worry much about having things. I worry plenty about relating to them’ (2005: 79).

But what is at issue in this worry about relating to objects? Perhaps – as in the past – our relations to objects says something about our relations to each other? Consider, for example, how, in relation to Nike, we ‘just do it’. In linguistics, a transitive verb is one that requires an object. So, for example, ‘to buy’, in English, is a transitive verb; we do not just buy; we buy something: for example, we buy brands. We do not just do; we just do ‘it’. And a brand such as Nike does not simply invite our participation by telling us to ‘just do it’, it also organizes that participation, and although it operates in terms of an injunction not that you must, but that you may (Žižek, 1999), the invitation to participate is one that is increasingly difficult to refuse. My proposal then is that the activities of subjects are being constituted in relation to the organization of objects such as brands that invite us to relate to them, and that we relate to them as individuals in ways that position us within a group or a collective so that in relating to a transitive object, we are positioned relative to each other. And that this relative positioning has a particular dynamic. Nike, as usual, has formulated this in a simple maxim: ‘if you know you’re good but can always be better, just do it’.

It is this notion of ‘being better’ – an imperative to organise social life via relations of comparison of the individual to others in a group – that I want to suggest is one of the characteristics of the new social way. And this ‘invitation’ to participate, to just do it, is not, I suggest, confined to Nike or my other examples. In the UK, we have a chain of leisure centres that are called ‘Better’, a national insurance company that is called ‘More Than’. There is a Canadian pharmaceutical company that has a range of products called Be.better, while the shoe and clothing company Timberland currently have the advertising strap-line, ‘Best then. Better now’, the i-Phone 6 is described as ‘bigger than bigger’ and Skye, Rupert Murdoch’s telecommunications company, exhorts us all to ‘Believe in Better’. The question such slogans invite is, can we ever be good enough?

To the extent that the answer they provide is no, then they can be seen to a form of ranking that is an example of what the anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1972) calls schizmogeneration. Bateson uses the term to describe the continual reproduction, confirmation and intensification of difference in ways that lead to progressive, more intensive differentiation between groups or individuals. It thus contributes to a form of ranking that can be contrasted with both a fixed ranking of status (In which, for example, status is fixed by birth), and with the notion of a meritocracy and the associated assumption of a level or flat playing field with fixed coordinates (Guyer 2010). It is for this reason, I suggest, that sociologists need to reflect on how the new social way organizes social groups, and whether and how comparison is lived as a social relation by individuals.

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