

Preface

Geoffrey C. Bowker

I had the privilege and pleasure of working and living with Leigh Star for many years. The first time I heard of her work was when she was coming to Paris, and I was told there was this ›funny‹ American researcher, whom I must meet, working on museums, who would be visiting with us for six months.

This set me to reading her original boundary objects paper with Jim Griesemer – a paper which has been so influential over so many fields. What I loved about it was the mix of formalism and grounded analysis: I could see at once that this was a work which could travel across multiple arenas, and could picture the ways the bird specimens were treated in the Natural History Museum at Berkeley. At that period, working with Carl Hewitt at MIT amongst others, she was developing an account of scientific knowledge production based around the observation that it was not individuals who produced knowledge but communities – and so if we wanted to rigorously describe the process we should look not to the epistemology of the individual scientist but the ways in which groups of people with differing commitments could work together. This comes out beautifully in the *Structure of Ill-Structured Solutions* paper, where the emphasis was not on the point of epistemological closure but on the continued and necessary ambiguity so central to scientific work.

We discovered an elective affinity very soon after meeting: when her visit ended, I followed her back to the California she so loved. This led, over the years, to our book *Sorting Things Out: Classification and its Consequences*. The word ›consequences‹ was central here: she was forever citing the wonderful phrase from William and Dorothy Thomas that: »If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.«¹ Whether the classifications she studied were ›true‹ was just not a question for her – it was the nature of the outcomes that mattered. Thus, when she wrote about ›what is not a boundary object‹, one of her central points is that the real question is ›when‹ is a boundary object – not essentialism, but situational analysis. Over this period, I learned to appreciate the deep commitment she had to Chicago School sociology and the associated philosophy of pragmatism: there was for her no real separation between doing sociological and philosophical work, providing one took a rich enough view of the nature of philosophical enquiry.

1 | W. I. Thomas/D. S. Thomas: *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs*, New York 1928, p. 571–572.

Each section in this collection begins with a paper which became a classic in its own right. Her work on marginality and suffering is one of her core contributions. We wrote about the ways in which individual biographies are governed by the active role of classification systems in our lives; her paper on the phenomenology of onions (known amongst her friends as ›the onions paper‹) is partly about what it means to live with an allergy that doesn't fit into standardized restaurant routines. (It was ›not elsewhere classified‹ – her favorite category). We used to bless this paper, since our friends who had read it would never serve her raw onions when we were over for dinner – so it served a pragmatic as well as a theoretical function. But suffering was key to her being – she suffered from largely undiagnosed severe pain for most of her life (from her early twenties until her death); and she wrote about it with such care and attention that it affected many. She was a pioneering feminist scholar here. Working in that way, she became increasingly personal in her writing – something she found difficult after her initial training – and wove in her biography and her poetry (she was a fine poet in her own right) in her articles. I was so looking forward to her continued work in this vein.

I still remember her working on *Steps Toward an Ecology of Infrastructure*. Again, where formalist, technocentric definitions of infrastructure were abounding, she and Karen Ruhleder came out with a heterogeneous list which can be read as saying that any formal definition needs to be complemented by an understanding of how infrastructure works in practice (›becomes visible upon breakdown‹, ›learned as part of a community of practice‹). The mix of rigor, empathy, and sociological insight that she developed is unique to her work.

Leigh had a difficult life in many ways; and it ended far too early. She had gone through a terrible period for a number of years, and then just as she found her health returning and her creativity fermenting (her last articles and poetry represented a whole new direction) she died suddenly after a minor operation. I can say that she (we) were as happy in her last three months as we had ever been, which is a consolation.

The work that Sebastian Gießmann and Nadine Taha have done in bringing this volume together, with such a rich group of commentators, is a splendid call to a continuing engagement with her work in just the way she would have so much appreciated.

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