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PART I

Aspects of existential sociology

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Existential sociology

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The revolt of brute being is an overriding fact of modern history. *Brute being* is that core of feeling and perception that is our innermost selves, our beings. Modern man is rediscovering his brute being, freeing his being, and thereby willing and creating a new self and a new world. Instead of striving vainly to transcend himself, to become some *thing* other than what he is, or submitting out of fear to externally forced repressions of his self and to continued hiding of his self behind elaborate fronts and self-deceptions, he is choosing to search for, to create, and then to fulfill his being. Everywhere modern men have asserted their human existence over other-worldly essences, their subjective beings over the absolutist domination of external objects, their creative feelings over oppressive moralism, the immediate reality of their perceptions over traditionally dictated forms, their self-willed desires over externally imposed repressions, their individual freedoms over collectivist tyrannies. This revolt is now shaking and transforming millions of individual lives, many mass societies, and all intellectual disciplines. We changed our lives first, then our thinking about our lives; now we will use this new form of thinking to change our lives further.

This bald assertion is too simplistic and apocalyptic. Our modern world is complex, highly varied, and full of confusing countertrends. No doubt this revolt, like all revolts, involves its own dangers of excess. Most importantly, it raises serious problems of social order, and these arouse deep anxieties that can produce tyrannical repressions. But, regardless of these modifications and cautions, I believe the crucial force of change, or revitalization, and of creativity in our modern world is this revolt of brute being.

The revolt of brute being, of the man-of-flesh-and-bone-in-the-world, is the dominant thrust of existential thought — in literature, philosophy, theology, psychology, and sociology. Although they are not the first to do so, the existential lovers and thinkers, with their many allies working

under different banners, have challenged the traditional absolutist forms of thought and society more successfully than any earlier thinkers. They have dissected, challenged, attacked, and striven to replace the traditional absolutist forms of science, which in the past century have held a sacred place comparable to that occupied by religion in the medieval world; of morality, which has oppressed our everyday lives with its concept of a homogeneous set of abstract, universal principles enforced by terrible stigmas and pain; and of bureaucratic controls, which have progressively herded us all into abstract categories of inhuman data to be processed.

Like earlier challenges to absolutist forms of thought and society, this existential challenge may be put down by the absolutists, who have both good reason to fear its consequences and deep anxieties inspired by growing social conflict and change. But there is no doubt that existential thought has already been a major challenge to absolutist thought and that this challenge is increasing today. In recent years the study of man and society has also increasingly been challenged by the same changes in our lives that have inspired existential thought and by existential thought itself.

A systematic presentation of the basic ideas of existential sociology must begin with the question, What do we want to know about human beings? The obvious answer is that we are concerned with understanding the social world, rather than the physics of perception, neurophysiology, cell physiology, the chemistry of life, or any of the other aspects of life. But that answer masks the many problems involved in deciding which realm of phenomena we are trying to understand. Just as functional sociology involved a radical shift in the definition of the relevant realm of reality, so does existential sociology involve a radical shift from the realm defined as relevant by the functional sociologists and even by most of the phenomenological sociologists.

Existential sociology does not begin with a definition of its subject matter, theoretical paradigm, or set of assumptions about proper scientific methods. Existential sociology begins only with the goal of truthfully understanding man in society. We seek to understand the total man in his total natural social environment. Nothing about man in society is irrelevant to our study; nothing about what is truly important in his life is prejudged or predefined. We take the complete man- and woman-of-flesh-and-bone in the concrete social situations in which we find them. Our decisions about what is important, and in what ways, are based on what we experience and observe about those complete individuals in concrete situations. Our decisions about how we know these things are based on our experience and our analyses within that experi-

ence of how one does, in fact, know the world. We do not stand outside experience and impose prejudged criteria of scientific methods upon that experience. We do not put society on the rack and try to torture the truth out of it by absolutist scientific methods. We seek truth in the ways we find necessary in the natural social world. We *create* truth from within by finding what works, what enables us to understand, explain, piece together, and partially predict our social world. Our knowledge necessarily remains partially relative, situated, and reflexive, though we continually strive to push it beyond our own immediate situations. We strive to describe and analyze the methods we have used in our concrete studies and to extend these, as we find them useful or workable, to new studies (for a discussion of our methods, see Johnson, 1975; Douglas, 1976).

To demonstrate the significance of this approach to the social world, this chapter briefly examines the development of the major classic sociological perspectives, presents an overview of some of the major conclusions of existential sociology, and then describes some of its most important details.

Classical sociological perspectives

Classical sociology was dominated by a taken-for-granted paradigm of social explanation or theory that we might call the *objective paradigm* (see Chapter 2). The goal was to produce a science of society, and *science* meant the traditional, nineteenth-century natural science aimed at producing knowledge that was “absolutely objective.” This goal meant that all social knowledge had to be tied to or made dependent on non-subjective, absolutely objective phenomena. The history of the traditional philosophy of science made it apparent that the only phenomena that fit that requirement were externally (physically) observable objects or events.

The first major foray into the scientific study of man, social mechanism, took the implications of this requirement literally: Only externally observable phenomena were considered. Man was seen as simply another mechanism, literally a form of clockworks in the early Cartesian works. Man had thoughts, feelings, intentions, and other subjective phenomena; but these were excluded from consideration or, in the case of the Cartesians, considered independent complements of the mechanistic clockworks or possibly epiphenomena — the “mentalistic excrescences” of the brain. Over several centuries the mechanists produced thousands of scholarly works that attempted to explain (supposedly) externally perceivable events in terms of other externally observable events. That is,

both the dependent and independent variables, the things explained and those explaining, were externally observable events or phenomena. For example, the mechanists argued that death rates or suicide rates were caused by climatic conditions, such as temperature, or by altitude, or by phases of the moon, or by menstrual cycles, or by thyroid disorders. Not surprisingly, this initial thrust of the science of man led primarily to the development of demography, which until recently retained its head-counting orientation and is still the social science most concerned with externally perceivable things — human bodies.

It was only with tremendous difficulty and soul searching, combined with ingenious ideas and possibly some casuistry, that the classical structural-functional paradigm of social theory grew out of and progressively diverged from this mechanistic model. If one follows the scientific literature on any social subject, such as suicide, through the nineteenth century, he finds a slow development toward considering social meanings as the causes of these externally perceivable events. The fundamental things to be explained, the dependent variables, were still considered externally observable events. These were the social actions (behavior, events), such as suicide, or the institutions, such as capitalism. But increasingly, the first factor in the equation (the independent, causal factor) was some kind of social meaning, especially values. At first these were included as one part of the explanation, along with phases of the moon and everything else (e.g., Morselli, 1903), but by the time of Durkheim and Weber, they were seen as the crucial independent variables, the sole explanation of social action. Because inclusion of this “subjective stuff” imperiled the scientific status of the work, these social meanings were considered to be objectlike in the sense that they could be analyzed as if they were objects. (This argument was more extreme and simplistic in Durkheim than in Weber, and this made Durkheim more acceptable as a model to the later American sociologists, who were committed to making sociology a “real” science.) The usual method was to show that one set of externally observable phenomena, such as divorce rates or rates of widowhood, were causes of another set of externally observable phenomena, such as suicide rates, and to infer, presumably in a completely objective, nonproblematic fashion, that the two were causally related through some necessary, meaningful connection. In this way social meanings were bootlegged into scientific social theory. They were introduced in the guise of objects.

This bootlegging operation became less desirable as the developments of logical positivism led sociologists and others increasingly to believe that objectivity was guaranteed by the methods or procedures of observation and verification, rather than by the nature of the phenomena being studied. Sociologists came increasingly to believe that as long as

they observed the subjective phenomena as if they were objects, by following the canons of experimental science, the results were objective. Social meanings, specifically values, could be scientifically determined by “hard methods,” such as the use of experimental questionnaires that supposedly prevented the experimenter from biasing the findings by excluding him as much as possible from the situation being observed. (Mail-order questionnaires analyzed by hired data coders became the purest form of science for many.) The paradigm in its most general form, as proposed by the functionalists, still assumed that the dependent variables to be explained were social actions and, as such, presumably externally observable events (though even these were conceded, in line with Weber’s definition of action, to be socially meaningful). But in the hands of the functionalists, the paradigm made social values (the “structure” of society) the independent variable, the cause, and simply insisted on determining these by objective means.

The functionalists were aware, like all men of common sense, that thoughts, beliefs, emotions, feelings, and all the other aspects of human subjective experience, exist. They were even at times willing to grant them some importance. Parsons (1951), for example, argued that cognition and affect (i.e., thought and feeling) are both important aspects of an actor’s orientation to any situation. However, the functionalists, like mechanists before them, were concerned with explaining the *patterns* of action, and they believed these patterns were the result of the third component of action orientation — evaluation. Values, or rules, were the fundamental independent, causal variables for the functionalists. As Durkheim (1951) put it: “Society is a moral phenomenon.” Durkheim believed values must dominate and control human emotions or else society is destroyed (social disintegration results) or the individual himself is destroyed (suicide from egoism or anomie). Parsons (1951) went even further, arguing that the values of society determine whether affect is allowed to be relevant to the situation (values specify either “affective involvement” or “affective neutrality”). Parsons might have agreed that when feelings dominate values there is a failure of “boundary maintenance,” but this was beyond the pale of relevance — almost inconceivable. For many functionalists society became synonymous with value patterns as social structure or social system was *defined* in terms of values.

The second major stream of sociological theory in America, the symbolic interactionism of Cooley and Mead, implicitly disagreed with the functionalists about the dominance of values, but agreed completely with the dominance of the cognitive, symbolic level of experience. The interactionists gave little direct consideration to ways in which social values determine social action, but they commonly assumed that values lie behind and determine or constrain the symbolic activity of actors.

The symbolic interactionists emphasized two aspects of human experience — symbols and social action. They saw symbols as the dominant factor, the cause of social action. As a result, their works commonly focused on symbolic activity, especially on the ways in which individuals construct and maintain self-images in terms of a shared universe of symbols (generally linguistic) through their interactions with other actors. The interactionists almost always emphasized the highly symbolic, highly shared aspects of social action. Even when they were concerned with the ways in which individuals construct self-images, they commonly dealt with the construction of highly shared, symbolic self-images (roles) out of a shared universe of symbols. Works in the tradition of Herbert Blumer were partial exceptions to this. Blumer's own work (1969) concentrated more on the choices of constructions than on the shared nature of action, but he gave little consideration to emotions or other less symbolic activity. Shared symbols were clearly the focus of Erving Goffman's writings on self-presentations and of the many works on what Becker et al. (1968) called group perspectives. Group perspectives are those ideas, such as "making the grade," that are shared by the members of a group and that tie together and, presumably, determine their group activities. These group perspectives were almost always named with linguistic symbols, so the focus of the work was on shared linguistic symbols and their determination of social action. Other writers commonly associated, however incorrectly, with the symbolic interactionists carried this emphasis on symbolic activity even further. For example, Kenneth Burke (1950, 1965) went to the extreme of considering linguistic symbolizations (rhetoric and grammar) independently of emotions, actions, or anything else.

The phenomenological philosophers and sociologists followed a similar line of development, but arrived at a different fundamental independent variable. Husserl's phenomenology was the philosophy of consciousness or intention — the meanings of things to the human mind (see Chapters 2 and 3). Explicitly it was a philosophy, not of the world out there ("being-in-itself"), but of how that presumed world is consciously experienced by man and how man experiences himself. But there was also an implicit assumption in this definition of purpose that proved of great importance in the development of the whole phenomenological tradition. This was the assumption that conscious, meaningful, intentional experience was the focus of phenomenology, the foundation of all that would ensue. Perhaps this assumption followed, as some have argued, from Husserl's commitment to shoring up, rather than abandoning, classical rationalism. Specifically, this focus on highly reflective experience seems to have been a result of the phenomenologists' primary concern with examining the properties of the "transcendental ego" (see

later in this chapter). Regardless of its origin, it led phenomenologists to emphasize the conscious, cognitive, symbolically meaningful aspects of human experience. There are, of course, phenomenological analyses of perception and feeling, but these have commonly been seen as less fundamental and have been greatly affected by the supposedly more fundamental analyses of conscious, symbolic experience.

Nowhere is this assumption more clear or more important in the development of later social thought than in Alfred Schutz's theory of meaning and the central place this theory played in his social thought (see Chapter 4). Schutz (1967) started his analysis with the assumption that Weber was right in arguing that social experience must be defined as *meaningful* experience. The crucial points of his argument were that Weber had not really shown what meaning is or how we come to have meanings and that Weber's analysis of motivation was inadequate. Schutz agreed with Henri Bergson that there is a stream of human experience (the *durée*) which is the ground of all experience. But he did not see this stream of experience as constituting meaning. Rather, meaning was created when the *durée* was broken by reflection, by looking back upon earlier experience, or by projecting oneself from the present into the future. Schutz, then, defined meaning in terms of highly conscious, reflective experience.

Schutz did not define meaning in terms of feeling or emotion or simple perception, all of which may be subconscious or even conscious, but not reflective. (It is quite possible that Schutz saw all consciousness as reflective by definition, in which case unreflective, but conscious, feeling would be impossible by definition. If so, his definition is simply contrary to commonsense experience and the meanings of the term.)

The effects of this theory of meaning on Schutz's social theory are clear. His social theory was sharply focused on "typifications," or highly shared meaningful experiences, which are commonly associated with linguistic symbols (names). Although his social theory was only secondarily concerned with action, Schutz's theory implicitly assumed that in some way actions (such as work) followed from the typifications constructed for the situation. Moreover, the emphasis throughout most of his work was on the rational, planful nature of human thought and action, as seen, for example, in his basic concern with "projects."

Schutz's theory was carried to its logical conclusion by Berger and Luckmann (1967). These authors defined their work as a "sociology of knowledge" because they assumed that commonsense knowledge in everyday life is the basic focus and determinant of everyday social action. Their book was devoted to an analysis of the ways in which highly shared symbols are used to construct typified social presentations and patterns of action (roles), which are then objectified, largely

as a result of a failure to remember (cognitively) that the constructions are indeed constructions. The purpose of the work appears to have been to provide a phenomenological foundation for the Durkheimian (functional) theory of social order. Berger and Luckmann assumed, with Durkheim, that the social world is indeed highly ordered and that this order is the direct result of social values. They emphasized the cognitive, symbolic, rational nature of society more than Durkheim did, as Durkheim was always at least aware of the existence of the “darker” side of human experience — emotions.

The ethnomethodologists took the same path, but frequently went to even greater extremes in considering only the highly symbolic and commonsensically rational forms of human experience (see Chapter 5). This is seen in the very definition of *ethnomethodology*: the study of “accounts” in everyday social life (Garfinkel, 1967). More specifically, this study of accounts focused on the ways in which the members of society show their actions to each other to be “rationally accountable.” A huge realm of commonsense considerations was immediately shorn away by the definition of the term. The ethnomethodologist did not even recognize the legitimacy of asking whether the members themselves believe their own accounts (whether they are lying) or whether they are simply presenting “rational accounts” for public purposes, while knowing full well that they are doing something “because it feels good,” or because they feel forced to act on the basis of “guesses” and “hope for the best,” or “on faith,” or for some other irrational reason.

The ethnomethodological concern with *indexicality* (the ways in which the situations of use are crucial in the interpretations of the meanings of symbolic accounts) could have led to a consideration of the unexpressed, even unexpressible, forms of human experience. In a few instances it did. But most ethnomethodologists moved steadily in the direction of considering only overtly expressed, linguistically symbolized accounts. At the ultimate extreme, as found in the writings of Harvey Sacks and his co-workers, this form of linguistic ethnomethodology imposed the further constraint that only those accounts that could be tape-recorded or videotaped could be studied. Ethnomethodology thus merged with linguistics. (This emphasis in ethnomethodology was probably due in large part to the implicit commitment of the ethnomethodologists to the search for the Husserlian transcendental ego; see later in this chapter.) Ethnomethodologists came to focus their work on symbolic, commonsensically rational, overtly expressed, linguistic accounts. As a result, the enterprise became a narrow one, with little or nothing to say, by self-imposed definition, about the experiences that concern human beings most in their everyday lives. Love, hate, anxiety, agony, order, disorder, deceit, lies, truth — all were supposedly irrelevant

to the study of man and should, by definition, be ignored. They might be studied indirectly in terms of what linguistic statements suggested about them, but even this could not be assessed because assessment would involve answering such questions as whether those experiences exist and what their relations to linguistic statements might be. Any such questions were forbidden by the rationalist vow to study only accounts.

All of us who have contributed to this book on existential sociology began our sociological work within the confines of classical sociology. We early found that tradition inadequate to deal with the problems and truths we encountered in our everyday lives and in our research into a broad spectrum of American society. We thus used the phenomenological ideas to help us understand our social world. We came increasingly to see the limitations of that form of thought and then discovered that the existential philosophers had followed a similar line of development in moving beyond Husserl's phenomenology. All our work remains fundamentally grounded in our own experience and our ever-expanding research on American and European society, but we have found some of the basic ideas of existential literature and philosophy of great help in clarifying and systematizing our ideas, in building our theoretical foundations behind us as we move forward. Although we are committed to remaining open to new experience in the world, and thus to avoiding any permanent closures of thought about the world, it is helpful to start the presentation of our many findings and ideas with an overview of man in society. This is necessarily an elliptical overview, meant to stimulate insights, to be a general guide to understanding what comes later in this book, and to make more systematic what has already appeared in earlier works. The understanding is also necessarily changing, for we must continually rebuild our rational foundations as we gain new experience.

An existential view of man in society

All the traditional social science conceptions of man and society agree in seeing the individual as caused by something, though their conceptions of cause and how to infer it vary. Man and his actions are the dependent variables. Each theory recognizes the existence of other causes and may even accept them as in some undetermined way important; but each theory is fundamentally monocausal. The utilitarians in economics and sociology saw rational calculations of personal gain as the basic cause. The structural functionalists replaced these causes with values or norms.