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Homo sum; nihil humani a me alienum puto [I am a man; nothing human is alien to me], said the Latin playwright. And I would rather say, *Nullum hominem a me alienum puto* [I am a man; no other man do I deem a stranger]. For to me the adjective *humanus* is no less suspect than its abstract substantive *humanitas*, humanity. Neither “the human” nor “humanity,” neither the simple adjective nor the substantivized adjective, but the concrete substantive — man. The man of flesh and bone; the man who is born, suffers, and dies — above all, who dies; the man who eats and drinks and plays and sleeps and thinks and wills; the man who is seen and heard; the brother, the real brother.

For there is another thing which is also called man, and he is the subject of not a few lucubrations, more or less scientific. He is the legendary featherless biped, the [political animal] of Aristotle, the social contractor of Rousseau, the *homo economicus* of the Manchester school, the *homo sapiens* of Linnaeus, or, if you like, the vertical mammal. A man neither of here nor there, neither of this age nor of another, who has neither sex nor country, who is in brief, merely an idea. That is to say, a no-man.

The man we have to do with is the man of flesh and bone — I, you, reader of mine, the other man yonder, all of us who walk solidly upon the earth. [Unamuno, 1954]

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Existential Sociology

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Introduction

Existential sociology is defined descriptively as the study of human experience-in-the-world (or existence) in all its forms. The fundamental, but not exclusive, method of existential sociology is direct personal experience, including that of our own daily lives and that gained through more formal and explicitly defined research practice. The goal is to construct both practical and theoretical truths about that experience, to understand how we live, how we feel, think, act. Underlying this abstractly defined goal is a passion to understand the wellsprings of our actions and their consequences; where we came from and where we are going. And intertwined with this passion is a gut-level faith in the ultimate utility of such understanding to guide us toward realistic solutions to the social problems we confront in our daily lives.

This definition of existential sociology is purposely broad, partly vague, and definitely open. Any sociology that seeks to remain faithful to the entire gamut of human experience must not begin with narrow, preconceived goals, clearly defined boundaries, or absolutist concepts of methodological propriety. The definition is intended merely to point to human experience as the realm of our concern. The definition is not formulated to fit existing professional boundaries or conventions: Existential sociology intersects and overlaps with many other disciplines, such as humanistic and existential psychology. It is open-ended to inspire a creative search, not an assertion of preconceived answers. It intends an invitation to others to join this search for more truthful understanding of our daily lives, not a claim of theoretical membership or exclusiveness.

Any work entitled “existential sociology” immediately raises questions of the relations between existential philosophy and existential sociology. The relations between philosophy and sociology have always been important and controversial. Historically, philosophy has had major influences on the development of the important forms of socio-

logical thought. Enlightenment philosophy had a profound impact on Durkheimian sociology, and the philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey had a great effect on the sociology of Max Weber. (These and other relations are analyzed in Chapter 2.) The philosophical writings of Edmund Husserl, Henri Bergson, William James, and others had great influence on the thinking of the early American pragmatists and remain a source of inspiration for the more recently developed phenomenological sociologies, such as ethnomethodology. Analyses of these and other philosophical influences are found in several of this book's chapters. But the empiricist rhetoric of nineteenth-century science, which is still powerful in sociology, has rendered these influences controversial. Emile Durkheim, whose work has been taken as an exemplary model by most American sociologists, was anxious to show that his theories originated from the "things themselves," the objectlike social facts external to individual consciousness, and not from any form of philosophical speculation. He often hid the ways in which his thoughts had initially stemmed from philosophy and the ways in which philosophy continually influenced his epistemological and methodological thought.

Some questions concerning the relations between existential philosophy (or literature) and existential sociology are easily dealt with. Some readers, for example, may initially assume that an existential sociology follows in the steps of the philosophy, that we have assumed the philosophy to be essentially correct and are now busily imposing those ideas upon our own experience of the social world. Some readers of early efforts of phenomenological sociology have even gone so far as to criticize it because it dared to diverge from the sacrosanct writings of Husserl and others. Other readers may be tempted to fault most of this volume for deviance from the traditions of existential philosophy or literature. So we must emphasize from the beginning that, although there are some clear and distinct lines of development in intellectual history that underlie and support our sociological efforts, our work is grounded in the social experience of daily life, not in any body of abstract philosophical thought. We did not begin with existential philosophy or existential sociology, and we do not expect to end with any kind of existential philosophy. We began with social experience, conducted extensive social researches, and have arrived, we hope, at a creative theory of society that is thoroughly grounded in that social experience and research. In general, whatever connections exist between our sociological enterprise and philosophy have come *after* the experience and research that led us to see (retrospectively) the relations between what we were doing and what some philosophers were doing. We then found the philosophy to be a valuable intellectual *resource* in creating more general understanding of that experience. We use the philosophical insights where

they fit and help; we forget them where they do not.¹ The major point to be emphasized here is that existential sociology begins with concrete, socially situated experiences, and only after that attempts to build more general, theoretical, abstract understandings of social life.² It builds its methods as it goes in accord with the demands of the subject matter and the desire to find progressively more general truths about human existence. In these ways it is fundamentally distinct from most traditional or classic forms of sociology. It draws upon that classic tradition in many ways, and we have all benefited greatly from the many creative insights of that tradition. But when we do draw upon those insights, we try to refound or reconstruct their relevance upon the firmer basis of our own social experience.

There are many specific similarities and differences between our work and that of philosophers and others called existentialists. Both the basic contributions and the basic problems of existential philosophy in relation to our own work lie in the fundamental methods utilized to *know* about the social world. In general terms, there are three different but overlapping forms of knowing in sociology and all other sciences: (1) *introspection* — the observation, description, and analysis of one's own inner experiences or reflections; (2) *self-observation* — the description and analysis of one's own everyday, commonsense experience, when alone or when in interaction with others; and (3) *systematic and more controlled forms of observation* — those descriptions and analyses carried out to discover the truth about some realm of social interaction. Although it is true that these last two forms of knowing presuppose the first, which is basic to all organized thought, all sociological theories commonly rest on some combination of all three. But theories differ greatly in the degree to which they rely on any particular form or any particular combination of these.

The traditional mode of thought in philosophy is some form of introspection: some form of thinking about thinking, about the forms or properties of reason, and about one's own conscious experience. The ideal of philosophical thought has been clear since Socratic days: One seeks knowledge of all things through knowledge of himself, his own

¹We did not want to impose a neologism (e.g., experiential sociology) upon our enterprise because this would foster an image of a rationally defined and well-delimited endeavor belonging to those who created the name and, moreover, would obscure what similarities do exist between our ideas and those of existential philosophers and writers. This would be contrary to our intentions and desires.

²Many phenomenologists and some others argue that this is impossible because our experience is determined from the beginning by our shared linguistic symbols. But this argument involves a basic misunderstanding about the fundamental importance of feelings for symbolic experience and of man's perceptual openness to new experience in concrete situations. Much of Chapter 1 is devoted to a discussion of this.

forms of reason, consciousness, moral experience, and beliefs. Philosophers have occasionally appealed to the world of common experience and even at times to some degree of systematic observations. But their predominant appeals have been those concerning the subjective stuff of the mind: reason and knowledge. Vague dissatisfaction with existing forms of social science explanation has led to a contemporary revival of interest in this venerable but musty tradition; in *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, for example, Alvin Gouldner promoted a conservation of this tradition by appealing to “radical” sentiments of the day.

One major stimulus of the early social movements of science in Western societies was a profound passion to achieve a more certain form of knowledge than seemed possible with this traditional, subjective form of philosophical thought. The scientific thinkers, who were reacting more against religious dogmatism than to philosophical traditionalism, found the “endless squabbling of the philosophers” repulsive. They sought to replace this with “the certainties of external, objective knowledge of the world.” Their ideal was opposite to that of traditional philosophy: Instead of knowing the world through an examination of one’s own thinking and experience, the scientist proposed knowledge of the external world first and, later, of thought itself by absolutely objectifying thought itself. By systematically controlling observations and thought in such ways that all ideas about the world, all knowledge, would be ultimately dependent upon or determined by the external world itself, they hoped to eliminate all concerns with the operations of knowing subjective mind. This ideal of absolute objectification of the world lingers in the rhetorical flourishes of positivist sociological thought, such as in the popular concern with verification procedures.

As might be expected, philosophers were not long in counterattacking. Hume and Kant especially tried to show that all forms of thought, including the most elementary scientific ideas about causality, were ultimately dependent upon or determined by the basic properties of thought itself, by the preexisting or a priori nature of the knowing mind. Although it is doubtful that these philosophical arguments convinced many scientists, by the middle of the twentieth century most serious natural and physical scientists had come, largely independently of philosophy, to recognize that absolute objectivity is a misconception (just as much as absolute subjectivity would be). More and more thoughtful scientists began to recognize that any concept of objectivity must depend ultimately, at least in part, upon the nature of the knowing mind and the situation of that knowing mind in the world. The centuries-old assumption by scientists that subject (knower) and object (known) can be effectively separated by experimental procedures — that experimental or other methodological protocol can produce the so-

called subject-object dualism — was completely undermined by developments within science itself. Many natural and physical scientists abandoned these inherited concepts of the categorical dichotomous separation of subject and object years before most social scientists were even familiar with the problems.

Our previous empirical researches and experiences (Johnson, 1975; Douglas, 1976) have pointed out several different features of the research process that show the impossibility of any absolute separation between the knowing subject and the objects of knowledge. The conclusion that subject and object are interdependent has two fundamental consequences for all social thought. First, it means that our traditional ideas about objectivity in the social sciences must be either changed or abandoned. This is a vital point to which we shall return. Second, the denial of subject-object dualism means that any attempt to get at truth, to rationalize our thoughts about the world, to make them more objective, or however one decides to phrase it, inevitably depends in significant part upon an analysis of the knowing mind itself and, most likely, on other aspects of the human knower as well. Put differently, once the rhetoric about treating thought and meaning as an object or “like a thing” (as Durkheim put it) is seen for what it is, we recognize that the truth of any study of the world ultimately depends upon the mind’s knowing itself: upon some form of systematic introspection and rational analysis.

The mere mention of introspection as the ultimate basis of knowledge raises the fear of solipsism in the minds of most traditional scientific thinkers. We present the most obvious arguments against this fear that introspection leads to solipsism in the beginning of Chapter 3, which examines the contributions of existential philosophy to theoretical sociology. But let us note here a further argument against solipsism. Even if the reader is unconvinced by all the vast empirical evidence and our arguments against the fears of solipsism, we can argue that our own personal experiences deny its possibility. And no better support for our denial can be found than our own experiences in putting together this volume, a project that spanned several years. The ten contributors to this volume represent a wide range of social backgrounds and past experiences, three different nationalities, a significant range of ages, a diversity of political sentiments and loyalties, and other important differences. Some of the contributors are close friends; others have never met. Some of the contributors know each other quite well, but dislike each other or have changed their feelings with the passage of time. And the feelings involved in some of our disagreements, whether these are of a situational or long-standing nature, are deep ones indeed. All these kinds of experiences are not incidental to the theoretical arguments ad-

vanced in this book. Indeed, we have tried to learn from these experiences and to articulate their more general relevance for our sociological work. Nevertheless, despite our differences, we were able to join together for the practical purpose of completing our common enterprise. Thus, when we argue that all human understanding is necessarily problematic and that therefore we must fundamentally change the traditional ideas about scientific truth (as detailed in Chapter 1), our personal experiences in trying to bring about such a reconstruction tell us that abandonment of the traditional subject-object dualism does not entail a precipitous descent into solipsism. We criticize the traditional sociological enterprise in order to invite a more creative, more truthful, open-minded reconstruction, not to destroy or sweep away all earlier social thought.

Personal research experiences together with in-depth involvement in and understanding of our daily lives are the most distinctive features of existential sociology. These are the foundations from which any truthful theoretical understanding of American society must spring. Precisely what existential sociology consists of, why it is so essential, and how it differs from the earlier sociological perspectives are discussed in detail in Chapters 1 through 4. But the reader will also find many other important aspects and emphases in our work. The emphasis on brute being, on the relative independence and dominance of feelings over the cognitive and evaluative features of social action, is the most striking and perhaps the most controversial. Chapter 1 considers at some length the relevance of brute being to sociological understanding. Specific illustrations of the overriding importance of feelings for a truthful understanding of specific actions are found in the substantive researches concerning television newsmakers (Chapter 4), a community mental health clinic (Chapter 6), social welfare workers (Chapters 7 and 8), persons who experience chronic pain (Chapter 9), and members of gay communities (Chapter 10). In addition to these emphases on brute being, our researches and other personal experiences lead us to stress how situated (or contextualized) our everyday lives are, how problematic and uncertain most meanings and understandings are for societal members, and how much people are involved in hiding their private selves from public view. These features of daily life are most strikingly illustrated in Chapters 1 and 7 through 10. Added to these is an emphasis on the inevitability of politics in most complicated social settings of contemporary society. Substantive data for this emphasis are presented in Chapters 1, 4, 6, 7, and 8. Finally, throughout this book it is clear that we do not feel existential sociology is complete when an empirical description or analysis of some setting or series of actions has been accomplished. Within the constraints imposed on us by our varying natural abilities,

we have tried, with what we hope is an appropriate sense of humility, to evaluate the implications of our descriptions and analyses, whether for sociology or social policy. An important point to be stressed here is that all these more specific aspects of our work have followed from our direct experiences, systematic observations, descriptions, and analyses, and not from any philosophical or theoretical predilections.

The specific emphases noted above provide a basis for distinguishing existential sociology from several other proposals advanced in recent years as alternatives to what has been the dominant intellectual motif in sociology: structural functionalism. Our emphasis on feelings, for example, distinguishes existential sociology from those programs that exclusively stress the cognitive aspects of social activities. These include the sociological followers of Husserlian and Schutzian phenomenology: Harold Garfinkel's "ethnomethodology" or "neopraxiology," Aaron Cicourel's "cognitive sociology," and John O'Neill's "wild sociology." All these represent an overreaction to the emphases structural functionalists placed on norms or values in their analyses. And some have matched the absolutism of sociological structural functionalism with their own brands, as exemplified by John O'Neill's assertion (1974:35) that "man is nothing else than the way he talks about himself." Our emphasis on the problematic and situated nature of meaningful experience contrasts both with the structuralism of Alvin Gouldner's "reflexive sociology" and Jurgen Habermas's "critical theory" and with the formalism of dramaturgical approaches in sociology. Our emphasis on the crucial importance of understanding the substantive rationality social actors use in their daily lives contrasts with the unexamined model of formal rationality found in exchange theory, the more recent versions of sociological behaviorism, and even some of the phenomenological sociologies. Our emphasis on the inevitability of politics in everyday life strikes a balance between those new alternatives that make no mention of politics and those that seem to consider all aspects of human existence as political in nature. Our emphasis on systematic research observations and the intimate relations between methodological problems and what is seen and known about the social world distinguishes existential sociology from Gouldner's and O'Neill's sociological introspection. And our evaluative interests contrast with the view of phenomenological description as the beginning and end of the sociological enterprise, as proposed or implied by Matza's "naturalism" and Hugh Mehan and Houston Wood's version of ethnomethodology. Both these last approaches, as well as some others, in our view, represent untenable denials that sociological work ever has direct or indirect moral or ethical implications.

Although this book is aimed at a fundamental reorientation of our

understanding of our lives, and although certain emphases herein provide grounds for distinguishing existential sociology from other recently proposed alternatives in sociology, it is important to avoid the excesses that so easily arise when such so-called fundamentals are at issue. It is all too common for readers to seize the distinctive aspects of a theoretical understanding and treat them as the whole. This may be useful for debate or for other rhetorical purposes, but it is destructive of true understanding. By emphasizing the importance of feeling, for example, we never intend to deny the importance of symbolic thought and rationality. Without reason, the human animal would have been extinguished long ago by far more powerful animals; symbolic thought is clearly one of the most distinctive aspects of human existence. What we intend is simply to put first things first, to put these other aspects into the primordial context of human existence. By doing so, we do not deny their importance; rather, we make their nature and significance clearer. Nor do we intend by our emphasis on the concrete, individual, situated nature of our daily lives to deny that there exist shared meanings, patterns, or structures to our lives. On the contrary, we have tried to reintroduce considerations of the need for some shared meanings, for actual patterns and policy matters — considerations largely excluded by other new alternatives in sociology. But we have tried to show that any such ideas of sharedness (or patterns) must be seen in the context of the pluralistic, conflictual, and necessarily problematic nature of our lives. Chapters 4 and 8, for example, emphasize the need to consider both sharedness and problematicness, pluralistic variability and patterns. Nor does our emphasis on the individual's freedom and creativity in any way deny the importance of community, constraint, or power in our world. We have long stressed their importance (Douglas, 1971b), but they must be seen in the context of individual experience, which is the beginning and end of all such abstractions: There is no community, no constraint, no power when individuals do not build them and maintain them. Even Chapter 10, which emphasizes individual freedom and creativity in constructing a gay self, is based on the importance of community or membership meanings to those individuals. But we have tried to put first things first, to build the less basic upon the more basic. Nor does our emphasis upon the crucial distinction between private and public lives mean that we think public lives are unimportant or false. The realities are much more mixed; all parts of our lives are important, only to varying degrees. From our readers we ask for a balanced appraisal of all these considerations.

The reader should consult his or her own social experiences to assess whether we have successfully articulated important truths about our social world. Certainly there will be differences in substantive details be-

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tween the limited numbers of settings we have studied and the vast range of experiences our readers have. But if we have articulated important truths about social existence, they should be clearly applicable to the experiences of our readers. Insofar as it still makes any sense to speak of a social science's objectivity, this is its foundation — our own everyday, commonsense experiences in society. When reading the arguments about the fundamental importance of love, hate, and all the other feelings in our lives, for example, the reader should consult his or her own life. The conclusion will almost certainly be that the point is obvious. Everyone knows immediately that he is a mass of complex, conflicting, momentarily changing feelings, and that this is where he lives, where his dreams, plans, and works begin and toward which they are directed. The reader may well find it ridiculous that we have had to make such a point of it. We hope, then, that he will see how ridiculous it has been for sociologists, all of whom purport to deal with matters of fundamental importance in social life, to have rarely mentioned feelings except to sweep them aside as residual epiphenomena unimportant to society or as unstudyable by the preconceived methods of "hard science." We hope he will see the obvious need to reconstruct such a science and accept our invitation to join us in this adventure to create more truthful understandings of our experiences.

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April, 1977

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