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EXISTENTIAL SOCIOLOGY

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Summary

The chapter provides an overview of the development of existential sociology as a perspective on social reality that has a relationship of affinity with symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and sociological phenomenology. The specific roots of existential sociology as an American, specifically West Coast, development is examined and its application to the study of a particular set of cultural practices is examined. The article concludes that although existential sociology never attained the status of a school, certain key themes concerning identity, meaning and the life course have been re-invigorated by contemporary debates on the relationship between structure and agency.

1 Introduction

In seeking to outline the theoretical parameters of existential sociology, two broad factors are important.

First it is necessary to acknowledge the kinship between sociologically inflected variants of existentialism and existential philosophy as a pre-existing body of thought. Although influenced by existential themes developed in the fictional and philosophical writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Fyodor Dostoevsky and in the more specialist philosophical writings of Soren Kierkegaard, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Edmund Husserl, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, the sociological

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engagement with this body of work has placed the emphasis on capturing the empirical realities of everyday experience.

Second, even given this empirical focus, the relationship between sociological and existential thought was more a matter of inspiration rather than an explicit adoption of ideas. Although Jean-Paul Sartre, in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, written in 1958 and recently republished had provided a bridgehead with his analysis of fused groups, seriality and alienation, this was not the connection emphasized by those who propounded a new sociological perspective.

Avowedly pluralistic and eclectic, existentialist philosophy can be said to be characterised by a set of broad themes rather than a coherent set of propositions. This is apparent in the fact that the adjective "existential" well before it was applied to sociology, was widely used to identify styles in art, dance, literature, theatre, poetry and more generally, a form of spiritual engagement with life. Given this expansive application, it might be best to argue that existentialism is a kind of sensibility that advocates a passionate engagement with the stuff of life in all its manifestations – its uncertainties, challenges and dramas.

2. Sociological precedents

Insofar as such themes attracted the interest of sociologists and individuals from other social science disciplines, such as psychology, what was influential was the epistemological insistence on the irreducibility of the perspective of human agents whose activities, emotions and thoughts are driven by the over-riding imperative to express their individuality. This view was not without a precedent in classical sociology. A key founding “father” of sociology who gave a central emphasis to the importance of meaning in social action was Max Weber. In his writings on politics as a vocation and his critique of the limits of bureaucratic reason, Weber recast themes he found in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche into a more explicitly sociological account. So for example, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber argued that the legacy of the Enlightenment had eventuated in a form of rationality that prioritised means over ends. Such a form of Reason was profoundly calculative and context-restricted in that the ends of action were not in themselves were not justified by some higher purpose or scheme of meaning. The spread of such rationality marked the process of the disenchantment of the world with the consequence that individuals were left to struggle for meaning in a fundamentally meaningless world, guided only by the ideal of commitment as a value in itself. Such a heroics of resignation bore more than a passing resemblance to Kierkegaard’s leap of faith – of a duty to be faithful to what is beyond human comprehension.

Another theme in Weber concerned the role of charisma, what Gerth and Mills in their introduction to *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, termed “the metaphysical vehicle of man’s freedom in history” For Weber “charismatic belief revolutionizes men from within and shapes material and social conditions according to its revolutionary will.” But for Weber the modern period was suffused with a romantic pathos, for charisma - if inextricably a part of human experience - was doomed to wither in the iron cage of rationality.

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The themes developed by Weber were only partially integrated into classical sociology in the muted form of an advocacy for the importance of the role of meaning and interpretation in social life. In this form, Weberian thought, as part of the canon of classical sociology, played down the possibility of a clash between rationality and irrationality that became a dominant theme for the proponents of everyday sociology. The subterranean strand of romantic thought in Weber remained as a tributary source to be picked up by thinkers interested in existential thought.

At the same time, given that the major proponents of existential sociology were American, it was clear that an important impetus for the adoption of themes from existential philosophy were part of a broader response to social and developments in contemporary America.

In general terms, two contextual factors were of particular importance. On the one side, there was an increasing dissatisfaction with Grand Theory, specifically the dominant sociological paradigm of structural-functionalism as represented by the works of Talcott Parsons, Pitirim Sorokin and , with firmer emphasis on a less abstract or middle range of social theory, Robert K. Merton. Certainly, part of the dissatisfaction with structural-functionalism was owed to its success, leaving an up and coming generation of sociologists in the 1970s and 1980's with the prospect of refining the grip of an overarching paradigm. At the same time, in the manner identified by Thomas Kuhn in his 1962 *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, the underlying assumptions of structural-functionalism were beginning to be called into question both theoretically by writers such as Alvin W. Gouldner in his 1972 *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* and practically, as is mentioned below, by social events.

The second major root in the development of existential sociology was the movement towards what came to be known as the sociology of everyday life. This was a broad movement which grew out of “an atmosphere, especially in California, of eclectic synthesis and excitement about ...new ideas”. Such new ideas were culled from a number of sources: from phenomenology as represented by Harold Garfinkle's and Aaron Cicourel's ethno-methodology with its emphasis on uncovering the tacit behaviours that underwrote social order and Harold Blumer's development of symbolic interactionism, and the work of Alfred Schutz on the phenomenology of the life world was another potent source of ideas about the nature of social reality. The influence of symbolic interactionism was probably the greatest, especially as filtered through the influential work of Erving Goffman on social dramaturgy. The latter's work gave a strong analytical priority to the micro-texture of social interactions as a site for the presentation of the self in order to influence the impression others formed of the self.

Goffman's view of social life as a fragile web of performances in which embarrassment and loss of face were an ever-present threat fits the existential perspective of a search, driven by self-interest, to create order out of ever impending chaos.

A tributary of the 'sociology of everyday life', existential sociology shared some of its common features. First, it prioritised the study of microstructures in contrast to the then dominant emphasis on macro-structure. Such an emphasis, it was argued, led into a mono-causal mode of analysis that failed to capture the nuances and complexities of life

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as experienced and lived - in a word, as a concretely given context. Equally to be deplored was the tendency in macro-structural analysis towards causal imperialism. In this view, subtle features of social interaction, particularly the meanings given and taken by ordinary humans, were reduced to abstractions, misrepresenting and reifying what that served to reify and misrepresenting what was a contingent and fraught social reality. Finally, a macro-structural analysis failed to engage with everyday experience and thereby lacked credibility and validity as an account of social action. Because of the limitations of a macro-sociological approach, existential sociology developed with a resolute focus on grounded experience and a micro-sociological perspective which comprised in Randall Collins's words:

“the detailed analysis of what people do, say, and think in the actual flow of momentary experience”.

3. A West Coast phenomenon

Existential sociology as a consciously articulated approach within sociological theory is best seen as an expression of American experience, particularly of the West Coast and, above all, California. The Californian connection is important since, in terms of life style, it presented a social milieu that was furthest removed from European influences that marked the East Coast and, in the particular case of structural functional sociology, the influences of Harvard. As one writer commenting on the unique nature of the “Sunshine State”, expressed it:

“More than any other state in the union, California projects indelible images of material wealth, beautiful bodies, exotic landscapes, cultural diversity, and opportunities for personal reinvention. Ideas about California, both present and historical, exist as a series of visual representations consumed through decades of advertising, movies, celebrity culture, and television shows that have, in turn, produced an infinite number of tropes: the California girl, the California tan, the California lifestyle, California fusion cuisine, California soul, and the ubiquitous California look, which might reference anything from low-riders to Pop art to artificial hair color.”

For many sociologists working on the West Coast, everyday experience presented itself as a multiplicity of encounters with different cultures and subcultures. Negotiating social encounters generated a sense of unpredictability and excitement, of making social order anew at the level of the quotidian rather than at the level of societal change. Individuals, very much feeling themselves as solo agents, needed to respond deftly to the moment in order to “get by” , constructing a definition of reality out of the immediate flux of experience.

The explicit development of an existential perspective in sociology - it is too diverse and eclectic to characterise as a school - was arguably predicated on a concept of social life as a continuously emergent accomplishment rather than an expression of a settled way of life. Consonant with this experience, everyday life became an object of sociological curiosity. As Wallace Stegner famously put it:

“If the history of America is the history of an established culture painfully adapting itself to a new environment, and being constantly checked, confused, challenged, or

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overcome by new immigrations, then the history of California is American history *in extremis*.”

It was not incidental that, for many, the period that saw the announcement of a new approach within the Academy was matched by symptoms of dissent and upheaval in the larger society. The decades of the 1960's and 1970's in America, particularly the Civil Rights and the Anti-Vietnam movement and the student unrest that developed in response to these larger movements, provided a vivid rebuke to what were increasingly perceived as the empty pieties of Parsonian action theory with its “over-socialised” concept of man and its emphasis on the power of the system.

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Biographical Sketch

Barry King is Professor of Communications at Auckland University of Technology. He is the author (with Sean Cubbit, Harriet Margolies and Thierry Jutel, of *Studying the Event Film: The Lord of the Rings*, Manchester University Press 2008 and has written widely on popular culture, celebrity and stardom, the new work order and social semiotics. He received his BSC (Hons) from City University, London and his PhD from the London School of Economics.