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THE MARTIAN AND THE CONVERT:

Ontological Polarities in Social Research

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A PERENNIAL, IF OFTEN SUBMERGED, concern of what are loosely termed the cultural sciences revolves around the core epistemological issue of 'How can we know?' With what eyes, thoughts, feelings, acts, assumptions and cognitions is the cultural scientist to approach and engage the human subjects of his inquiry so as to be able, in the end, to render as valid and felicitous an account of their being and doing as science, or perhaps art, will allow?

As in the broader discussion of this overarching philosophical question, that dealing with the problem of knowledge in

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general, the cultural sciences have, since their eighteenth and nineteenth centuries beginnings, come up with a range of parallel and equally conflicting answers. These have varied, at one extreme from highly astringent forms of objectivistic positivism ("we can know nothing of our fellow humans other than those sense data which their actions register upon our standard measuring instruments"); through a number of materialistic-naturalistic approaches ("there is a concrete social reality out there which exists independent of our being and can be explained in its own terms"); to, at the other extreme, several sub-types of subjectivistic idealism, some of which verge on the solipsistic ("what we know of our fellow man is in the last analysis wholly locked in our own minds, and hence is incapable of generalization"). Needless to say, none of these putative "answers" has at any time proved sufficiently satisfactory to a large enough body of social scientists to lay further methodological controversy to rest. Also, needless to say, the gnawing persistence of this fundamental epistemological issue appears in no way to have diminished the ever-swelling tide of studies and professional publications that purport, often with a heady cocksuredness, to describe, analyze and explain this or that slice of social reality. Whether this attests to some inherent robustness of the cultural sciences, an *élan vital* which recoils from the sickly pale of philosophical speculation, or more to a state of rampant mindlessness, I leave for others to judge. Here I wish only to draw out and explicate to a degree two contrary ontological-epistemological tendencies found among cultural scientists, and oftentimes as well within the same cultural scientist depending on the kind of research problem at hand. Rather, though, than attempt to distinguish these contrasting, at times polarized, tendencies with the now almost conventional language in which they are discussed in that somewhat nebulous realm known as the philosophy of the social sciences, I have chosen here instead to resort to the metaphors of the *Martian* and the *Convert*. I do so out of the conviction that when faced with the concrete problem of studying this or that about our fellow human beings, these metaphors can better capture the

epistemological dilemma (and subjective anxiety) of the cultural scientist than can the more formal language of philosophy.¹ It should, perhaps, also be stated that although my remarks will relate mainly to the situation of the participant-observer fieldworker, they pertain at a level once or twice removed almost equally to other modes of social science inquiry as well, for example, questionnaire surveys, interview studies, demographic research and historical inquiries of various kinds.²

THE MARTIAN

The underlying attitude of the Martian, assuming even he is prepared to acknowledge something so intangible as an attitude, is one of intransigent and unremitting doubt toward everything the members of a group, organization or society may tell him, or even show him, concerning their motives, purposes, values, plans for everyday action, and so forth. This is not to say the Martian would for a moment deny that members' accounts of themselves and of their actions were not meaningful, necessary or relevant *for themselves*. On the contrary, he is more than ready to allow that were it not for these more or less standardized, common-sensical accounts of "why what is done is done the way it is," social life would be impossible, that is, society could not exist. The crucial point for the Martian, however, lies in the recognition that *all such accounts* are by their very nature more or less unexamined *social constructions*. And, for him, the overriding aim of social science inquiry is to get beyond the literal substance of members' constructions of their social life to the most basic elements and processes whereby such constructions take shape in the first place. That is, he aims to dissect the *constructed* character of social life rather than merely to elaborate, classify or otherwise "rationally reorder" that which a society's members tell him about their world; their world being a socially constructed one within which, as he sees it, they are cognitively imprisoned and, hence, incapable of doing more than replicating its taken-for-granted dimensions in self-confirming ways.

The Martian, then, yearns to grasp the human situation with wholly fresh or, better yet, strange eyes, in a blush of wonderment as it were. In order to do this he wants to divest himself completely of the vast array of unwitting cultural assumptions, rules of thumb, modes of sensibility and—were it somehow possible—the very language, which comprise the “cognitive stuff” of our everyday worlds and beings. In keeping with that version of radical empiricism associated with Husserlian phenomenology, he seeks to free himself as far as possible from *all* presuppositions that touch on his inquiry.³ While, perhaps, not going so far as to fancy himself the *tabula rasa* of Lockean philosophy, he does, nevertheless, envisage the possibility of some distinctive order of intelligence which would permit him to see through, around and behind the perceptual and cognitive constructs operative in the world of everyday life. Only then is there a chance for their workings to be revealed. Moreover, this is an intelligence which would in no way derive from that of everyday life but would attain a status wholly independent of it; hence, an intelligence which is not sullied through “translation” back into the world of everyday life. (It would not be *traduced*, in the original pejorative sense of that term.)

Our true Martian fantasizes invisibility as well. Not only would this spare him the pain of participatory pretense, but invisibility would also serve to eliminate the danger of having his pristine, presuppositionless intelligence contaminated through contact with the cognitively corrupted characters he wishes to study in their native habitat and natural state, as it were. How marvelous to be the omnipresent ghost in the family closet, to witness first-hand and in utter unobtrusiveness the anguish of the boudoir and the bestiality of the playroom! Would such freedom and power, at long last, not make for a social science? Whether the Martian (or some merely perverse mortal) could in fact so drastically distantiate himself from the immediate concerns and involvements of those he studies and yet manage to *understand* them, is a question we shall consider later.⁴ For now let us simply record his profound conviction

that it is only by so transcending the encrusted givenness of everyday life, however this is to be accomplished, that a truly valid and objective science of society becomes possible; a science which, precisely because it chooses rigorously to suspend the assumptions of the common sense world, can furnish us knowledge of the constituent character of that world without itself being reduced to mere common-sensicality.

THE CONVERT

The Convert, too, starts from the conviction that the human's social world is a wholly constructed one and not something given in nature or through outside agency. Paradoxically, however, he draws a very different conclusion from this axiom than does the Martian. Because in the first instance he knows himself to be an outsider and not a natural member of the group he wishes to study, he takes it as an article of faith that the lives, views and aspirations of natural members (including, perhaps, the very ways they perceive, organize and interpret their constructed worlds) must differ in *significant*, if not in all, respects from his own. The main methodological objective of his inquiry, therefore, is to reduce as far as possible the estrangement he feels from his subjects so that he may begin to perceive, experience and interpret their world as they do. The fact that he may share a language and numerous taken-for-granted mundane assumptions with his subjects is not viewed by him, as it is by the Martian, as a source of *cognitive entrapment*. On the contrary, the fact of such sharing is evaluated positively inasmuch as it affords a basis for gaining more rapid entré into the group and achieving greater intimacy with its members. For only then, of course, does the Convert's goal of experiencing his subjects' world as they do stand some chance of realization; and this, in turn, is absolutely essential, as he sees it, if he is to ever produce a valid *objective* account of their subjective world. Put somewhat tritely, his guiding principle is but a variant of the familiar everyday

adage . . . “unless you’ve been in my shoes, you cannot know whereof you speak.” In contrast to the Martian’s desire to escape and stand wholly outside the social ontological frame of his subjects in order to see how the frame is constructed, the Convert’s overriding impulse is to immerse himself ever more deeply *within* the frame so that the distinctive subjective currents of the group may forcibly and directly reveal themselves to him.

It is, perhaps, superfluous by this point to explain why I have chosen to label the possessor of this ontological stance, the *Convert*. Suffice it to suggest that so thoroughly to divest oneself—even if only temporarily “until the study is over”—of one’s customary sense of self for a passionate identification with the life scheme of others, is closely to approximate what the social psychologist would term a conversion experience, that is, a radical, relatively discontinuous transformation of identity. An important difference, of course, is that whereas the religious or political convert does not (consciously, at least) plan on getting converted—deeply unsettling and revelatory experiences *move him* toward conversion—the anthropologist or sociologist may all but explicitly plot his conversion upon entering the field. (Is a consciously engineered conversion a genuine conversion, one might ask?) In any case, the number of fieldworkers who enter the field as Martians and exit as Converts is, I would guess, far greater than the other way around.⁵

DISCUSSION

Surely, by now the reader may well object: there is no such person, much less social scientist, like the Martian or Convert. Indeed, the more one contemplates these crude, cardboard cutouts, the more outlandish does their existence seem. No one, be he steeple-jack, stockbroker or sociologist, goes about—wittingly or unwittingly—perceiving and engaging the world about him in ways approximating either of the ontological

stances drawn in the preceding pages. In short, these types are existential impossibilities.

With these objections I have no quarrel. On the contrary, I could not agree with them more. But to quickly assent to the empirical impossibility of such fictional characters is to retreat too soon from the more interesting question of what it is about the cultural scientist's actual being-in-the-world which makes for the types' impossibility in the first place. And, to raise this question involves something more than the facile erection of straw men. For, as we all know, there are innumerable methodological writings in the cultural sciences, as well as a much word-of-mouth "professional wisdom," which tacitly, if not always consistently, enjoin the student to conduct himself in the field in ways closely resembling a Martian or Convert stereotype. By inquiring into the existential bases for the Martian's and Convert's impossibility, we are also pointing to the dangers of such "advice."

I can here only allude to, rather than fully explicate, some of the considerations underlying the impossibility of these types in their pure form.

As regards the Martian, we must consider the following:

(1) Is it possible even remotely to attain—through meditation, drugs or sheer phenomenological gall—the presuppositionless universe that the Martian-in-principle strives for? My own hunch is that, beyond some probably unspecifiable point, as the social researcher begins to approximate the extreme ontological stance of pure Martianhood, to that degree does he come to understand less rather than more about the constitutive world of his subjects. To see the world with pure eyes unsullied by prior experience or assumption is, in other words, to see nothing at all, simply because without prior experience we don't know what to look for or what we see.

(2) This is not to deny that the Martian's attempt to make the commonplace and taken-for-granted seem uncommon and problematic—a sociological version of Bertold Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt*⁶—is not a useful heuristic device. To think of being as "presentation of self," of becoming as "socialization," of a person as an "actor," of what he does as

his "role," of what others customarily expect of him as his "status," and so forth through the whole glossary of key social science terms—can, of course, prove of much help in conceptualizing our data and pointing up connections among them that we might otherwise have missed. But, Erving Goffman notwithstanding, to assume or even talk "as if" the *verfremdungseffekt* of the observer-analyst is what is *actually* seen, felt or thought by those he studies—in other words, that the shoe clerk really thinks of the fitting bench as "front stage" and the stock room as "back stage"—is, finally, seriously to falsify and distort this subjective world. This variant of what Alfred North Whitehead (1925) once termed "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness" summons to mind the still charming and ever instructive spoof of Horace Miner (1956) "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema." Here Miner pokes somewhat obvious fun at the health practices of Americans, but much more subtle fun at the explanatory style of his own guild, the anthropologists, wherein the accepted jargon of the craft evokes in those who are being written about that queasy intellectual feeling of cognitive seasickness: the world as described seems accurate enough in its gross features, but somehow terribly skewed and off-center in its particularities. To wit: bathroom sinks are not experienced by Americans as ritual fonts nor hospital nurses as vestal virgins.

(3) Finally, even if we grant a certain validity to the Martian's metaphoric constructions of everyday experience, to the degree that these succeed at all they come peculiarly to negate themselves. Thus, for the layman to come to conceive of an inchoate sense of disconnectedness as "alienation" or a hypersensitivity to others' opinions as "other-directedness" is to transmute the very experience which the sociological concept was meant to comprehend in the first place. Put differently, to assimilate such concepts into one's being is to make a different social object of the self than existed prior to the act. Fresh possibilities for avoiding, affirming, rejecting or revising the identity implications of the construct are thereby opened to the actor and thus drain the construct of its erstwhile descriptive éclat and predictive power. And, in this modern world of rapid

media popularization of social science concepts, and given the highly self-conscious and ideologically manipulative use that radical and other protest groups have come to make of the social science armamentarium, the likelihood of any pristine Martian construct remaining phenomenologically uncontaminated for long, as it were, is drastically diminished. Ironically it can, perhaps, now be said of social science that *nothing flaws like success*.

So much, for here, for the Martian. As for the Convert we must consider such matters as these:

(1) As I have already implied, in what sense is the somewhat studied and planned immersion of the convert into the culture of the group the equivalent of a more naive and forthright conversion experience? And if, as we have reason to suspect, these are not the same thing—indeed there is a pronounced quality of disingenuousness about the whole business—could this not also account for the passionate zealotry with which many an ethnographer Convert takes up the cudgels for the group he has studied after leaving the field? It is almost as if the insincerity of the ethnographer's conversion experience *per se* generates so large a burden of guilt, he can only dissipate it through an excess of ideological partisanship in favor of the group studied.

(2) More pointedly, can the ethnographer's *acquired* inter-subjective view of his informants' world ever be the same as that of the informants' themselves? One may doubt this, if only for the reason that the ethnographer can assume and renounce affiliation with the group he studies in a way that is foreclosed to members themselves. And, does this freedom of non-membership not impart to the ethnographic account certain peculiar emphases, niceties and rigidities which are absent from the members' own experiences of their lived world (*lebenswelt*)? In the end William Whyte could write about the "status hierarchy" significance of bowling scores for the boys of Cornerville in a way that, at best, "translates" or reifies the bowling experiences of the boys themselves. Not that I am for a moment suggesting that there is anything inadequate or flawed

about Whyte's account; on the contrary *Street Corner Society* endures as one of the best ethnographic works of modern social science. It is only that it, too, must ultimately encounter the epistemological paradoxes inherent in humans trying to study and objectify their fellow humans.

(3) Thus, even if there were no grounds for questioning the correspondence of subjective orientation resulting from the ethnographer's immersion in his subjects' world with the actual intersubjective constitution of that world, the prior epistemological question (one which positivists take positive relish in) of whether a "verstehen" account can ever be a wholly accurate, or even adequate, one remains far from resolved.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, then, there is for social research no easy reconciliation or resolution of the contradictions represented by a Martian as against a Convert stance toward our topics of inquiry. And, even though much more could be said about the scope and content of the debate, I think most of us would still be inclined ultimately to opt, perhaps Pollyannaishly and with the smug wisdom of Goldilocks, for some middle ground—to wit, that we need both the Martian and Convert strains in our research, preferably with both echoed in the same researcher if at all possible, as I believe it is. For, in the end, the capacity to experience the world freshly from the outside and knowingly from the inside is part of the great duality of intelligent social life itself. To replicate in our sociological research this duality through an ongoing interior dialogue which constantly counterposes the stark epiphanies of the one to the intimate knowingness of the other moves us nearer, I would suggest, to a more felicitous account of humans' actual lived world than can either stance by itself.

NOTES

1. On the social scientist's use of metaphor, see Severyn T. Bruyn (1966: 133-142).
2. The rendering of these other modes of inquiry within the same metaphorical scheme is not to deny that each cannot in its own right be differentially classified as partaking more of one tendency than of the other. Thus, for example, whereas I would be inclined to locate conventional demographic studies near the Martian end of the continuum, we cannot rule out the presence of certain epistemological assumptions and cognitions in demographic studies which partake more of the Convert stance.
3. Marvin Farber (1966: 36-38).
4. See, however, Schutz's unusually sensitive discussion of this problem in his essay "The Stranger," in Alfred Schutz (1964: 91-105).
5. Indeed, a considerable body of, at times conscience-stricken, conversion-sensitive literature has accumulated in the cultural sciences in recent years (see, for example, Hammond, 1964; Vidich et al., 1964; Redfield, 1962; Seeley, 1967; Powdermaker, 1966; Sjoberg, 1967). Also see the extraordinarily well-informed novel on the "culture" of sociological field work by Alison Lurie (1967).
6. See Peter Winch (1958: 118-119).

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