

# ONE

## Introduction

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This book examines the way in which everyday life in the modern metropolis is continually eroded, distorted, overpowered by, and subordinated to institutional forces that seem beyond human control. In part 1 Joshua Gamson and Josepha Schiffman thematize the importance of power in new social movements (an AIDS activist group and two peace groups), particularly the way civil society is not outside but traversed by regimes of micro-power. In part 2 Alice Burton and Ann Arnett Ferguson criticize the exclusive focus on hierarchical control in studies of work. Instead they underline the importance of horizontal ties for creating the conditions of resistance to bureaucratic control in a welfare agency and for maintaining alternative organizations such as a baking cooperative. In part 3 Leslie Salzinger and Shiori Ui downplay what is conventionally stressed in the literature on immigrants, namely their cultural background. Instead they highlight the way in which state and economy have shaped and limited strategies for occupational advancement among refugees from Central America and Cambodia. In part 4 Leslie Hurst shows how the separation of family, school, and classroom contributes to the breakdown of teaching of lower-class teenagers, and Nadine Julius shows how restoring connections between teacher, parent, and student can improve education. In part 5 Kathryn Fox shows how the state, through its laws and regulations and through its control of funds, constrains ethnographic outreach work among drug users, while Charles Kurzman studies the autonomy of academic ethnographers to adopt different values and interests.

All the studies examine how power and resistance play themselves out in social situations that are invaded by economic and political systems. They highlight what Jürgen Habermas calls the colonization of

the lifeworld by the system.<sup>1</sup> In the face of commodification through money and administration through power, everyday life loses its autonomy and shared purpose. But their analyses do not simply record this colonization, they also explore resistance to it in the forms of negotiated orders, alternative institutions, and social movements.

If the students share a substantive theme, they also share a common research technique—the technique of participant observation, or what some call the art of ethnography. Participant observation is usually viewed as one among a number of techniques of social research—archival, survey, demographic, and experimental. What distinguishes participant observation is the study of people in their own time and space, in their own everyday lives. It is often referred to as natural sociology, studying subjects in their “natural habitat” as opposed to the “unnatural” setting of the interview or laboratory.<sup>2</sup>

According to convention, each research technique has its own advantages and its own distinctive biases, ways in which it distorts the reality it seeks to comprehend. Thus, the advantages of participant observation are assumed to lie not just in direct observation of how people act but also how they understand and experience those acts. It enables us to juxtapose what people say they are up to against what they actually do. The dangers of participant observation are said to derive from the same source as its virtues. Too close contact with the participants can lead to loss of objectivity or to contamination of the situation. The problem of objectivity is compounded by the problem of validity, namely, intensive research limits the possibility of generalization. It is sociology’s “uncertainty principle”: the closer you get to measurement on some dimensions—intensity and depth—the further you recede on others—objectivity and validity.

As a technique of research there are courses on participant observation as well as excellent books that outline ways of countering or compensating for its pitfalls.<sup>3</sup> They take the aspiring participant observer through entry into the field, being there, and finally leaving. They describe field notes and how to analyze them systematically. They distinguish between overt and covert participant observation, conducted in open or closed settings. They consider the range of membership roles from full participant, at one extreme, to participant-as-observer to observer-as-participant to complete observer at the other extreme. They discuss the ethical dilemmas of entering the lives of others and then of broadcasting the information collected there. This book is different. It is not a cookbook; it does not provide any recipes. If it demonstrates, it does so by example. Each study presents its own unique constellation of problems, and only in their afterwords do the authors discuss the dilemmas they confronted in their studies.

This book is intended less as a contribution to the technique of participant observation and more as a contribution to the methodology of social science. We seek to unchain ethnography from its confinement as a quaint technique at the margins of social science.<sup>4</sup> In our eyes participant observation is the paradigmatic way of studying the social world, and from this point of view anthropology becomes the paradigmatic social science. By “paradigmatic” I do not mean that participant observation is the only technique or necessarily the most appropriate technique of social research, but rather that it best exemplifies what is distinctive about the practice of *all* social science. Situated at the crossroads of the humanities and natural sciences, social science combines both understanding and explanation. Understanding is achieved by virtual or actual participation in social situations, through a real or constructed dialogue between participant and observer, or what we call the *hermeneutic* dimension of social science. Explanation, on the other hand, is the achievement of an observer or outsider and concerns the dialogue between theory and data, or what we call the *scientific* dimension.<sup>5</sup>

From this standpoint there are two reductions we seek to avoid. The first is the positivist reduction that reduces social science to the natural science model and suppresses the hermeneutic dimension. In this view the interaction of participant and observer is a source of “bias”—a nuisance to be minimized rather than the distinguishing feature of all social science, indeed without which there could be no social science. Rather than allowing us to regard ourselves as inextricably part of the world we study, positivism demands we aspire to the position of the neutral outsider. The second reduction we seek to avoid is the humanist and, more particularly, the “postmodern” suppression of the scientific dimension. Here scientific theories are exposed as simply another world view, this time that of the observer, in no way superior to the world view of the participant. Social science is reduced to a dialogue between insider and outsider aimed at mutual self-understanding—“the comprehension of self by the detour of the comprehension of other.”<sup>6</sup> In the words of Alain Touraine, sociology becomes a “discourse that interprets other discourse, an ideology criticizing other ideologies, all the while remaining blind to effective behavior and situations.”<sup>7</sup> Explanation loses any distinctive meaning. Defending this reduction, Clifford Geertz says our business is limited to the “understanding of understanding.”<sup>8</sup> This leads social science down the path of textual analysis, where it merges with literary criticism.

For us participant observation has the distinct virtue of highlighting the limitations of both forms of reduction. It brings together both the perspective of the participant who calls for understanding and the perspective of the observer who seeks causal explanation. It necessarily

combines both hermeneutic and scientific moments and thereby casts exaggerated light on the tensions and dilemmas that are definitive of all social science.

Let me deal with the hermeneutic axis first, that is, the problem of understanding. Like natural scientists, social scientists face the task of interpreting data. However, they differ from natural scientists in that the data are themselves constituted by a community—the community of participants. In the social sciences there are not one but two interpretive tasks, what Anthony Giddens calls the “double hermeneutic.”<sup>9</sup> Data are the preconstituted theories and concepts of participants, and their meaning can be gauged only in relation to the context of their production. What respondents say in interviews is shaped by the context of the interview. Whether a death is counted as a suicide depends on how and who and in what circumstances the death was registered. This context dependence of meaning, or what Harold Garfinkel calls indexicality, requires careful examination of the situation in which knowledge is produced, which in turn requires actual or virtual participation in the lives of those one studies.<sup>10</sup>

But how does one conduct such a situational analysis? In order to appreciate the self-understanding of the participants, some advocate that observers strip themselves of their biases in order to become like their subjects. Ethnographic work is then a feat of empathy in which we immerse ourselves in the community we study. Others argue the opposite: that objectivity comes only from distance. Herbert Gans, for example, embraces the image of the participant observer as a marginal person—detached and emotionally removed.<sup>11</sup> From a different standpoint Geertz makes the same point: “Understanding the form and pressure of, to use the dangerous word one more time, natives’ inner lives is more like grasping a proverb, catching an allusion, seeing a joke—or as I have suggested reading a poem—than it is like achieving communion.”<sup>12</sup>

We advocate neither distance nor immersion but dialogue. The purpose of field work is not to strip ourselves of biases, for that is an illusory goal, nor to celebrate those biases as the authorial voice of the ethnographer, but rather to discover and perhaps change our biases through interaction with others. Thus, an “I-You” relation between observers and participants replaces a “we” relation of false togetherness and an “I-they” relation in which the I often becomes invisible. Remaining on the sidelines as a marginal person or positioning oneself above the “native” not only leaves the ethnographer’s own biases unrevealed and untouched but easily leads to false attributions, missing what remains implicit, what those we study take for granted. The practical consciousness of everyday life—whether of oneself as social scien-

tist or of those one studies—contains a great deal that is tacit, what Peter Winch calls nondiscursive, and therefore not explicitly articulated.<sup>13</sup> The pursuit of nondiscursive knowledge, that is, knowledge that is assumed rather than unconscious—both the observer’s as well as the participant’s—calls for participation but not immersion, observation but not marginality. Once more this privileges participant observation.

Dialogue between participant and observer poses the question of power. Insofar as the relationship between participant and observer is that between power unequals, to that extent the dialogue is distorted. Recently anthropologists have become sensitive to the way power differentials affected the study of colonial societies.<sup>14</sup> Classical anthropologists too easily bracketed the domination that made their field work possible. Coming in under the auspices of a colonial regime to study preliterate societies, anthropologists were not compelled to be responsive to the interests of those they studied—people who would never read or even be aware of the books that were written about them. Following recent trends in anthropology, we too are sensitive to inequalities of power between participant and observer. But being sensitive to power inequality doesn’t remove it. Although many of us had considerable loyalty to the people we studied, and revised our papers in the light of their comments, nevertheless in the final analysis what we wrote was outside their control. This is not to justify either complacency or paralysis but to recognize the limits of responsiveness. As Michel Foucault has taught us, social science as we know it today rests on an irreducible level of domination.<sup>15</sup>

I now turn to the scientific dimension of social science, the dialogue between theory and data whose goal is explanation. Participant observers can be distinguished from those whom they study by their participation in the academic community. Indeed, the academic community gives them the reason for being field workers in the first place. Although social science depends on lay concepts as the foundation of its analysis, it also tries to go beyond the lived experience of participants. We are interested not only in learning *about* a specific social situation, which is the concern of the participant, but also in learning *from* that social situation.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to the participants, we want to be able to make causal claims that have validity beyond the situation we study. It is the task of *methodology* to explicate methods of turning observations into explanations, data into theory.

What methods are available, then, for moving from the data of participant observation to the level of social theory? One can attempt to make generalizations across different social situations, looking for what they have in common. This is a process of induction associated with *grounded theory*. Alternatively, one can try to uncover the tacit under-

standings, the taken-for-granted knowledge that underlies competent performances of those we study. We can set about revealing the non-discursive knowledge that makes social action at all possible. This is the project of *ethnomethodology*. Both grounded theory and ethnomethodology are methods that use participant observation to develop micro-sociology.

While we have drawn on these microsociologies, we are more concerned to examine what they bracket—the institutional context that shapes and distorts what happens in the lifeworld. In this connection there are also two approaches. On the one hand, what we call the *interpretive case method* regards the micro context as a setting in which a particular “macro” principle, such as commodification, rationalization, or male domination, reveals itself. The uniqueness of each situation is then lost as it becomes an expression of the whole, of some essential defining feature of the totality. While we are concerned with a single principle, that of domination and resistance, nevertheless we also pursue a different strategy we call the *extended case method*, which examines how the social situation is shaped by external forces, or, in the terms of C. Wright Mills’s sociological imagination, tries to connect “the personal troubles of the milieu” to “the public issues of social structure.”<sup>17</sup> The extended case method thus bursts the conventional limits of participant observation, which stereotypically is restricted to micro and ahistorical sociology. (If one wants to do research of a macro or historical kind, one had better leave the field site for the archive, the survey research center, or the institute of demography.) We challenge the conventional correspondence between technique and level of analysis and argue that participant observation can examine the macro world through the way the latter shapes and in turn is shaped and conditioned by the micro world, the everyday world of face-to-face interaction.

But such an outward-extension calls for a particular mode of theorizing, described in chapter 2. In traditional ethnography, participant observation tends to produce detailed descriptive accounts that have no obvious relevance beyond the immediate situation. When traditional ethnography makes good its theoretical claims, they usually concern what Erving Goffman called the “interaction order” in settings of “co-presence.”<sup>18</sup> Such theorizing emerges directly out of the data. It is very different from the extended case method, which is realized not through induction of new theory from the ground up but through the failure and then *reconstruction of existing theory*. But what existing theory? We search for theories that highlight some aspect of the situation under study as being anomalous and then proceed to rebuild (rather than reject) that theory by reference to the wider forces at work, be they the state, the economy, or even the world system.

As the following chapter makes clear, our intent is not to reject bad theories but to improve good theories. We don’t believe there is a final truth which once arrived at gives incontrovertible insight. Nor do we start with a tabula rasa, as if social science begins with us. Rather we seek to place ourselves in a wider community of social scientists by taking the flaws of existing theory as points of departure. This is not a token recognition that perfunctorily appears at the beginning of an article, but a deep engagement with the ideas of others.

Thus, in our view participant observation is not only a paradigmatic technique for studying others; it also points to a distinctive way of understanding ourselves. The dialogue between participant and observer extends itself naturally to a dialogue among social scientists—a dialogue that is emergent rather than conclusive, critical rather than cosmetic, involving reconstruction rather than deconstruction.