

The Focus on Everyday Life: a New Turn in Sociology

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Sociology is currently undergoing an interesting theoretical and methodological turn. A number of recent and influential works of sociology deal with the seemingly trivial phenomena of everyday life. The standard mass surveys are being replaced by in-depth, interpretative, and qualitative procedures that focus on the visual surface of society. They do so by means of observation and its extension – photography. The author believes that this is not a new fashion but rather signals a true paradigmatic shift. For the author, it heralds the emergence of a ‘third’ sociology, after the ‘first sociology’ of social organisms and systems, and the ‘second sociology’ of behaviour and action. The new focus is on social existence manifested by social events of various scales. This sociology of social existence provides a new angle of vision, which promises to advance considerably our understanding of several perennial riddles of human society.

The focus of recent sociology seems to be changing in a striking way. If we glance at the catalogues of the most prestigious publishers in the social sciences – Blackwell, Cambridge University Press, Polity Press – we encounter titles that would have seemed totally inconceivable, and would have even been regarded as utterly ‘unscientific’, only a decade or two ago. Serious and well-known authors happily publish books on topics such as love, intimacy, friendship, eating out, pop music, shopping, sex, fashion, anxiety, risk, distrust, single-hood, health and fitness, taxi riding and the like. A century ago, Georg Simmel acted as a sort of forerunner of this kind of sociology, but working as he did in the heydays of ‘scientific’ sociology, particularly of a German brand, the specific focus he pursued prevented him from ever achieving an academic career (see: Simmel^{1,2}). Not so today: Simmel himself has been brought back from oblivion, and has been re-instated as a guru of the current sociology, of a status equal to those earlier idols Karl Marx, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim.

At the same time, we observe a shift in sociological method from the quantitative mass surveys that for many decades dominated sociological research toward more qualitative approaches: observation, case studies, in-depth interviews, the interpretation of ‘ego documents’, i.e. spontaneously created personal records of experience (letters, lifestories, family photographs), and the analysis of the social iconosphere as a particularly interesting novelty. There is quickly emerging a sub-discipline of visual sociology, and there are some that are already proclaiming the ‘iconic turn’ in sociology!

The theoretical and methodological tendencies are of course linked. Indeed, if we conceive of the episodes of everyday life as the central subject matter of sociology, we have to turn – or perhaps better, return – to the methods of observation used widely from the beginning of the 20th century by social anthropologists or ethnographers, because, if anything, everyday life is certainly ‘visible’, and therefore observable, and therefore recordable by photographic (and other visual) techniques.³ I recall a famous German sociologist, who had spent most of his career on sophisticated mass survey researches, admitting in private: ‘You know, if I want really to understand Italian society I do not send out questionnaires, but go to the cafe at the corner, if I want to understand German society I go to the bierstube, and if I want to understand British society I go to the pub. And in all these places I just look around’. Just ‘look around’: this is the best advice for cultivating the sociological imagination.

The ‘third sociology’

What then is common in this array of seemingly unconnected, trivial topics on which current authors focus? They bring sociology down from the very abstract level of macro-sociological problems of social organisms, social systems, socio-economic formations, social structures, social development, etc, to the level of the everyday life of people amongst other people, together with them, side by side with them, in cooperation, competition, conflict, or struggle with them, in love or hatred, but never alone, in isolation. Current studies fasten upon the simplest and most typical of human experiences, bent on unravelling their subtle collective or interpersonal dimensions and internal mechanisms. Most of these books are descriptive, analytical and typological. But there are also attempts to construct full scale explanatory theories focusing on everyday life. Just three recent examples need be mentioned: the theory of face-to-face interactions by Jonathan Turner,⁴ of interaction ritual chains by Randall Collins⁵ and of cultural pragmatics and social performances by Jeffrey Alexander and his group.⁶

Is this current turn toward everyday life and iconographic methods and sources just another passing fad in the discipline of sociology, which is particularly

vulnerable to fashions, or is it a sign of a real theoretical and methodological turn, perhaps even a true paradigmatic shift?⁷ I will argue for the latter. For me, it signifies the birth of the ‘third sociology’, the sociology of social existence, following after the ‘first sociology’ of social wholes – organisms, systems – as practised by the classics of the discipline, Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, and later Talcott Parsons, and the ‘second sociology’ of social ‘atoms’ – behaviours, actions, or even their ‘sub-atomic particles’, meanings, scripts, texts – initiated by Max Weber, and later pursued by George Herbert Mead, Claude LeviStrauss and others.⁸ The ‘third sociology’ takes as its ultimate object of inquiry social events: human action in collective contexts, constrained on the one hand by the agential endowment of participants and on the other hand by structural and cultural environments of action. Thus, the reified abstractions of the first and second sociology are overcome from both sides, the macro-abstractions of systems and structures existing somehow above human heads, and the micro-abstractions of behaviours or actions existing somehow inside of the real life of human beings. The ‘third sociology’ rejects both these reductions of social life, i.e. the upward reduction, treating it as the manifestation of systemic or structural determinants, and the downward reduction treating it as the sheer aggregate of behaviours or actions. The idea of social existence focuses on what really occurs in human society, at the level between structures and actions, where the constraints of structures and the dynamics of actions produce the real, experienced and observable social events, the social-individual praxis making up everyday life, in fact the only life that people have, which is neither completely determined nor completely free. In the notion of social event the agential (personal) input of acting individuals and the structural (situational) context within which they act are brought together in one, undivided phenomenon.

In this way, the ‘third sociology’ parts with two illusions of common sense. First, it does away with the arrogant and egocentric belief in our individual autonomy, importance, exceptional quality and independence from the rest of society, because indeed if we look at it from a purely bodily perspective we are separate bags of skin full of flesh. But this is not the essence of our humanity! Second, it forsakes the opposite, fatalistic and resigned belief that our fate is entirely shaped by invisible, superhuman and uncontrollable forces, as we constantly bang our heads against a wall curtailing our freedom – the wall of laws, rules, principles, and standards not of our making, and we go through various painful experiences if we ignore this wall, or do not recognize it in time: ridicule, rejection, social isolation, banishment or even imprisonment. Yet this does not preclude the importance of human agency.

Instead, the ‘third sociology’ paints a more realistic picture of the human condition, or ‘social existence’, which embraces both the limits of our ‘freedom from’, due to our unavoidable embeddedness in the net of relations with other

people who happen to be free, too, and the opportunities for creative participation in the life of society, or our ‘freedom to’, due to our unique location in wider social constellations with other people, who may be influenced by our actions.

Social existence is intrinsically dynamic. The old metaphor of social ‘life’ grasps this feature very well. Like life in the literal sense, social existence never stops, because once it stops it is no longer life. But it is dynamic, not only in the sense of a constant, incessant operation or functioning (routine, reproductive ‘changes in’, as some sociologists put it), but also in the sense of driving the productive, longer range ‘changes of’: social processes or transformations. Years ago I proposed a conceptual model to interpret the dynamics of social life.⁹ I was fighting on two fronts. On the one hand I rejected the notion of development, or evolution, or modernization, so typical of the ‘first sociology’ – which assumes some linear, inevitable direction of social (historical) process deterministically driven by some super-human, abstract and reified forces, as if over and above our human heads. On the other hand, I rejected the idea of a completely free, random, fragmented, and arbitrary course of human actions that would not allow for any temporal regularities, as implied by the ‘second sociology’. Instead, I introduced the concept of ‘social becoming,’ which synthetically covers both sides of the coin: the immanent momentum of processes creating (or limiting) opportunities for viable, consequential actions by human actors, and the individual input by variously endowed actors, which allows them either to exploit or to forego these opportunities. The level where the two influences meet in the undivided flow of social change I labelled ‘social agency.’ At the time this was intended as my exposition of what I now see as the ‘third sociology’ of social change. Now we can link these two central notions, social existence and social becoming, in the synthetic, dynamic model of ‘social existence’. Social existence, constituted by social practices in the domain of everyday life, drives the process of social becoming, the self-transformation of society by social agency, i.e. by particularly endowed people acting within the limitations or facilitations given by the inherited phase of the social process, itself the result of earlier practice carried out by their predecessors in earlier phases of the process. Social existence and social becoming constitute what is ‘really real’, ontologically basic and prior in a human society. It is toward the analysis, typology and theoretical explanation of this level of reality that the ‘third sociology’ is now moving.

The promise of visual sociology

As mentioned earlier, the methodological counterpart of the focus on everyday life is a turn toward qualitative methods. One of these is observation and its extension by means of photographic (and similar) techniques. In modern society there is a lot of things one may see if one ‘just looks around’, heeding the advice

of the German sociologist mentioned earlier. But all of them appear precisely at the level of everyday life. One may not directly observe macro-objects, social classes, states, institutions or nations. One also may not be able to directly observe micro-meanings, motivations, intentions of human actions. At the level of everyday life, though, there is a whole 'spectrum of visibility'. At one end there are the spontaneous, but culturally tainted gestures, body language, 'face work', physiognomy, as well as the whole civilizational and technical 'design' of our environment (so strikingly colourful and varied in modern big cities). At the other pole there are the various images purposefully created to convey some meaning or message: billboards, commercials, photographs, pictures in magazines and journals. In between, we find purposeful stylizations of the people, 'self presentations' aimed to convey some information about themselves and their status: ways of acting, speaking, style of conduct, 'savoir vivre', brands and fashions, products used to impress others (the Rolex watches some people wear, the residences in which they live, the cars they drive – as in the Mercedes ad: 'you don't need to make a statement but you can!'). This extremely rich iconography is open to observation and to its extensions, photography and other visual recording techniques.

If for the time being we limit our discussion to photography, there are two ways in which this may be used in the sociology of everyday life: by taking photographs of social situations, and by interpreting existing photographic images. Taking pictures has many uses. To begin with, it raises our sensitiveness to social situations because it replaces passive 'seeing', where the innumerable chaotic impressions just float before our eyes, by intentional 'looking', where we consciously select and rank images according to their importance. Three technical features of the photographic camera are very helpful here. First, we have to focus on something, which means selecting something of the highest importance in the observed situation. Second, we have to frame the picture, which means bracketing, or eliminating those features of the situation considered less important, or marginal. Third, we have to determine the depth of field, to distinguish foreground from background.

The photograph 'freezes' rapidly changing and complex social situations, and allows us to analyse them in more detail. Thus, it enhances sociological descriptions or diagnoses. But it also helps explanation, by uncovering trends, regularities or even perhaps 'social laws'. The latter holds not for a single photograph but rather for a series of photographs. If we repeatedly take pictures of the same social situation, or of the same social environment, at different moments in time, we can discover temporal tendencies, and if we take pictures of the same types of human behaviour (e.g. family life, religious life, labour, recreation, etc) in comparative studies of different cultures we can discover commonalities, or 'cross-cultural universals', as well as culturally constrained, 'exotic' particularities.

In our time we also have access to extremely rich, varied (and rarely explored) existing iconographic sources: existing photographs of social situations in the media, photo journalism, but also private, amateur collections of family photography, photo exhibitions, museum collections, ads, billboards etc. These may be subjected to sociological interpretations unravelling hidden structures of four types: interactional structures (by looking at the characteristic patterns, or the ‘geometry’, of interpersonal contacts, the shape of groups, crowds etc), normative structures (by observing standardized, repeatable forms of behaviour), ideal structures (by observing expressions of beliefs and ideologies, e.g. on the posters carried at political demonstrations, strikes or riots), and finally opportunity structures, or distributions of inequality (most easily perceivable signs of poverty or richness, of power and powerlessness, of fame and marginalization, the status of celebrities and underdogs).

The origins of the ‘third sociology’

Paradigmatic turns in the social sciences are usually a reaction to two sets of circumstances. Some are of an immanent nature and have to do with intellectual tendencies: the exhaustion of, or a disenchantment, or even sheer boredom, with earlier ideas. Other factors relate to the changing characteristics of social life itself, which cannot be fully accounted for by earlier approaches.

The road toward the sociology of the qualitative study of everyday life was paved by three theoretical tendencies emerging in the second part of the 20th century. A first tendency emerged from the critique of abstract sociological systems as epitomized at the time by the structural-functionalism of Talcott Parsons (see Gouldner¹⁰), and led in three directions: a subjectivist turn toward the study of intentions, motivations, and reasons behind social actions, an agential turn toward the study of social actors and the ways in which they create and construct social structures, institutions, organizations etc, and a cultural turn toward the search for the subtle, underlying tissues of meanings, rules, values, norms, assumptions, and ‘habits of the heart’ regulating human conduct. The most important authors to promote these new lines of sociological enquiry were: Erving Goffman and his dramaturgical theory,^{11–14} Harold Garfinkel and his ethnomethodology^{15,16} and Alfred Schutz, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman and their phenomenological approach.^{17,18}

The second major trend was the post-modern critique of earlier sociology, particularly the ‘post-modernism’ of the more sane and realistic kind which, far from rejecting the possibility of social science, provides insightful observations about the current stage of social change, which is called late modernity, high modernity, second modernity, reflexive modernity or fluid modernity. The authors representing this variety of postmodernism,^{19–23} argued that the earlier

sociology neglected such crucial features of our society as fragmentation, randomness, chaos, contingency, risk, ephemeral, spontaneous and capricious manifestations, bodily, emotional and self-reflexive character, globalization, etc.

The third influential trend has been feminist social critique and theory, which started to look for the manifestations and reasons for the oppression, discrimination or exploitation of women in everyday life contexts, particularly in the family and workplace.

Such internal, intellectual developments in sociology to some extent reflected the new phenomena emerging in society at the turn of the century. People have become more and more acutely aware of their rapidly changing, and in many respects strikingly new, 'lifeworld'. Sociology, which after all is not much more than conceptually sophisticated and empirically grounded common sense, could not but reflect such new or heightened awareness. The new qualities of social life may be summarized under such labels as: technological changes (particularly of communication and transportation), globalization, mega-urbanization, consumerism, flexible forms of work, transformations of intimacy, expansion of risk and saturation with visuality. As a good indicator of social changes one may take the changes in language, the vocabularies with which people describe their world. In the vernacular, new terms appear earlier than they do in sociological conceptual schemes. Thus, it seems not accidental that nowadays we speak of shopping instead of buying, clubbing instead of drinking in a bar, love-making instead of loving, body-sculpting instead of exercising, zapping instead of watching TV, 'chatting' in 'chat rooms' instead of talking, surfing on the net instead of on the beach, blogging instead of writing memoirs, Emailing instead of corresponding, sending SMSs, MMSs, etc.

The ontological premises of the 'third sociology'

The new tendency of sociology focusing on the qualitative study of everyday life is still in an early phase of development. To become a valid theoretical orientation it requires conceptual tools. I wish to propose and briefly elaborate some tentative conceptual distinctions. The central concept of the 'third sociology' of rich ontological implications is social existence. At my suggestion (at that time as President of ISA) this was the main theme of the World Congress of Sociology at Durban in 2006, and the response of the participants as well as the heatedness of the debates indicate that I had hit on something important.

The concept of social existence draws the ultimate consequences of the old idea, already phrased by Aristotle, that humans are social animals, or more specifically that existence is always collective – from birth to death. For the human species the central dimension of existence is 'togetherness'. Hence, neither individuals nor societies are separate or autonomous entities. Both are the

purely analytic aspects of a single individual-social reality, or individual-societal field, or social network, or as the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert puts it: inter-human space.

The intrinsic duality of the social fabric was already grasped in one of the classics of 20th century sociology by Norbert Elias.²⁴ The first part of the human equation goes by the label: 'individual in society'. There is no single, detached, autonomous individual. Each of us is a member of some collectivity, and an individual identity ('I') is the result of the place an individual assumes in a wider group ('We'). I am with whom I meet, with whom I talk, with whom I become friends, with whom I marry, to whom I lecture – and the traces of all such encounters are in my biography. The uniqueness of my identity is due to the unique cluster, the unrepeatability, of such contacts in my present and in my past, as well as of the potential contacts in my future (more precisely the present opportunities for such contacts due to my professional position, class standing, gender, status). An individual is a unique 'knot' in the 'human web', the carrier of a unique bunch of social relationships. The second part of the human equation goes by the label 'society of individuals'. This is perhaps more intuitively obvious. There is no society above or beyond its participating individuals. In each of its manifestations, which we often label by shorthand terms like the state, the nation, the institutions, organizations, etc, society is nothing but some combination of actors and their actions, and all more abstract or more permanent social traits are the consequences (often unintended and even unrecognized) of what virtues the members represent and what they actually do, given the opportunities and constraints inherited from generations before them.

Thus, the concept of social existence carries the message that the social world is nothing other than an interpersonal field, an inter-human space, filled with encounters, contacts, interactions, relationships. social bonds, ties, 'ligatures',²⁵ or links with others covering the whole spectrum from love and intimacy to interests and contracts, from cooperation to competition, from consensus to quarrel, from peace to war. And this embeddedness of human beings in the relationships with other human beings occurs nowhere else but in our everyday experiences. It is the central, social aspect of our existence as humans. All other aspects of society: macrostructures, macro-processes, cultures, civilizations, technological systems, organizations, institutions – in fact exist not somewhere outside, but inside our social existence and permeate from within the simplest everyday events in which we routinely participate. They last only as long as people take actions toward others and establish bonds and relationships of various forms. Society lies not outside ourselves but within us.

Therefore, everyday life appears as the area where social existence manifests itself best, the most conducive 'strategic research site'²⁶ for sociology. And the extremely rich visual, externally observable face of everyday life provides

a strategic research resource for analysing and explaining everyday life – and hence to unravel the secrets of social existence. This is the link of the sociology of social existence (defined in terms of a particular ontological focus) with visual sociology (defined in terms of a particular methodological approach).

The meaning and anatomy of everyday life

The concept of everyday life is not self-explanatory and may carry misleading connotations. Thus, we first have to specify what ‘everyday life’ is not, and then proceed to define its positive features. First, everyday life is not confined to what Emile Durkheim called ‘*profanum*’ as opposed to ‘*sacrum*’. It embraces Durkheim’s ‘*sacrum*’, i.e. unusual occasions endowed with particular symbolic significance. Magical, religious, ritual, symbolic, solemn, ceremonial practices are included alongside down-to-earth routines. Lunch at work, mass in the church, shopping in the supermarket, attending a patriotic manifestation, watching TV in the evening, and attending a concert of the Berliner Philharmoniker – all are episodes of everyday life in the wide meaning proposed here. Second, everyday life is not confined to the life of common people in any ‘class’ sense (in English idiom, the life of the ‘commoners’), but includes equally the life of elites, celebrities (as one American TV program calls it: ‘The life ways of the beautiful, rich and famous’). Of course, the everyday life of celebrities is more picturesque, colourful and attractive to watch, and thus provides a huge income to tabloids, paparazzi and gossip columnists. But the category of everyday life cuts across all class divisions. Third, everyday life is not synonymous with private life and opposed to public life, it comprises both domains even though the participating actors may differ. But for politicians, journalists, active citizens and even most people at the time of elections, the actions in the public sphere are as equally ‘everyday’ as any private events. To make or hear a political speech, to go on strike, or to go cast a vote do not differ in this respect from dinner with friends, going to the movies or attending a family reunion.

What then are the positive, defining traits of everyday life? First, as we already discussed, everyday life is the observable manifestation of social existence, and therefore it always includes relationships with other people. It always occurs in a social context. Even when we are alone, others are virtually present in our thoughts, memories, dreams – those whom we love or hate, who are our friends or enemies, with whom we cooperate or fight, whose company we enjoy or detest, whose advice we cherish or reject, before whom we feel pride or shame. We always conduct with them what Margaret Archer calls an ‘internal conversation’²⁷ and this becomes a crucial component shaping our motivations and actions.

Second, everyday life events are repeated and not unique. Sometimes they are even cyclical, rhythmic, turning into routines. They occur day after day, month

after month, or at certain fixed moments during the year. Examples include: eating out on Friday evenings, taking trips to the country at weekends, attending church on Sundays, vacationing in summer, skiing in winter, sowing in spring and harvesting in autumn, celebrating Easter and Christmas, fasting on Good Friday and dancing on New Year's eve.

Third, very often everyday life assumes ritual, dramatized, stylized forms following certain un-reflexive, deeply internalized scripts. This is, for example, typical for habitual actions: exercising in the morning, reading the newspaper at breakfast, going out for a lunch break, having a drink after returning from work. But it is even more obvious in the case of more solemn, sacred occasions: religious ceremonies, commencement at the university, a trial at court, a diplomatic reception.

Fourth, everyday life engages our body – biological endowment, physical prowess, and emotions – with all its strength and frailties, potential and limitations. Our bodies are indispensable props in our full-fledged relations with others. Even when we communicate at a distance, our pitch of voice is important, and we develop technologies to at least see the faces of interlocutors on the screen. We feel that completely disembodied and anonymous communication with strangers via the internet (when we cannot even imagine their looks) lacks some crucial element, is imperfect, incomplete and unsatisfying.

Fifth, everyday life is usually localized in space, it occurs at certain locations – at home, in the street, in the church, on the athletic field – and the character of the site significantly determines the character, style, form and content of social events.

Sixth, episodes of everyday life have a certain temporal duration – they last longer or shorter in time. Compare the encounter with a friend at the street, dinner at a restaurant, an academic seminar, a long-distance flight or a vacation voyage. They may also have different 'structurally expected durations' – to use the term of Robert Merton:²⁶ a football match, symphonic concert, parliamentary session, a 'first visit' to somebody's home following traditional custom etc. The actual or expected length significantly influences the character of a social event.

Seventh, everyday life often flows un-reflexively, following habits and routines of which the actors are not fully aware. This is the reason why the question on the phone: 'What are you doing now?' often evokes an embarrassed response 'Oh, nothing', which is patently untrue, provided that the responding person is not dead! We are always doing something, as long as we live.

Each domain or research area develops a set of concepts to deal with analytic aspects or dimensions of phenomena. The sociology of social existence has not yet developed such a standard conceptual framework. So here are some suggestions, a set of initial sensitizing concepts allowing us to approach everyday life in a more analytic and systematic way.

First, in each social event there are a certain number of participants, who relate to each other. Participants embody various social roles. The relations among them may be direct, face-to-face, involving spatial and temporal co-presence (discussion over lunch), but they may also be distant and mediated (conversation over the telephone), temporally delayed (exchange of letters), or even completely anonymous (chat on the internet). A crucial consideration is the number of participants. It was Georg Simmel who first called attention to the fact that sheer numbers may determine the character of events and the content of exchanges and interactions. He demonstrated how adding participants changes the quality of a network.¹

Second, each social event occurs in some immediate situation. What counts as particularly important is the presence or absence of bystanders, witnesses to the event who do not participate directly themselves. This distinguishes private from public social events. The others who witness the event make up the social environment of the event. The strongest influence is exerted by those who focus on the event actively, but even the sheer presence of uninterested others may be important. Notice how in the presence of anonymous and neutral others in the restaurant, or the bus, or on the train, we tend to lower our voice and to construct a niche of privacy or intimacy. But we behave differently if we want to interest others and get them involved, as in the case of a political rally, or a riot, or a fire alarm in the building. Gustave LeBon²⁸ and other representatives of ‘crowd psychology’ have a lot to tell us about the influence of massive co-presence on our conduct.

Third, each social event occurs in some wider social context, of family, work, consumption, recreation, leisure, education, religion, politics, sport and more – in which people constantly circulate, which they enter and leave during a day, a week, or longer spans of time. In each context we behave differently, look differently, sometimes even dress differently, speak a different language, take on a different emotional tone, soak in a different ‘atmosphere’. We leave home, go to work, then shopping, then drop in to a pub, then go to a fitness centre or tennis court, then return home, etc. The change of context is often signalled by certain rites of passage: logging on a computer when coming to work, putting on slippers and having a drink when returning home, changing into athletic dress when entering a tennis club, putting on pyjamas and a robe when registering at the hospital, dressing up for a concert, etc. We also signal leaving and entering various contexts by customary greetings. Notice how often during the day one says ‘hello’, ‘how are you’, ‘good bye’, ‘see you later’ etc. Sometimes we use gestures: we take out our purse or credit card to signal the end of dinner to the waiter in a restaurant, the lecturer closes her notes to indicate the end of the lecture, the candles are extinguished in the church to show that mass is over.

Fourth, social events occur in certain locales, arenas typical for particular contexts, the locations where events usually have similar content: home, the street,

the church, the hospital, the playing field, the school, the library, the pub, the disco etc. The events occurring in these locations are similar because people usually do similar things there: at the library they read, at the hospital they stay in bed, on the street they are shopping or looking at the store windows, on the field they play or exercise, at the church they pray, in the restaurant they eat, and so on.

Fifth, social events assume more complex configurations. In various contexts and localizations we encounter typical social occasions: complex configurations of events where different individuals in different roles perform together in a coordinated manner. The examples are marriage, a funeral, a party, a surgical operation, a lesson at school, a football match, a religious procession. Social events may also arrange themselves in temporal configurations and typical sequences of events. Here we may speak of certain procedures, which have to be followed in order for constitutive events to have meaning. Employment, court trial, public auction, elections and examinations at the university provide examples. If such procedures are long range, cover a number of steps, are planned ahead of time and have an intended conclusion, we may speak of projects. Completing a university education, training for a sports event, pursuing a professional career, writing a book, saving for a house, and bringing up children, are examples of projects. People differ in the rigidity or spontaneity of their projects, consistency or flexibility in their realization of them. Sometimes social events, social occasions or procedures rely on heavily symbolic gestures and very precise scenarios. It is essential for them how something is done, rather than what is done and what it is for. Here we can speak of social rituals. Their purest form is to be found in religion, both in churches and in the traditional observance of religious holidays. But there is also a lot of ritual in politics and the military: parades, rallies, public speeches, the changing of the guard. Many rituals make up what is sometimes called 'banal nationalism', raising the flag, singing an anthem and celebrating national holidays. There are rituals in the domain of recreation and leisure as well: festivals and carnivals, mass parades, raising and waving hands at rock concerts.

The extreme symbolic ingredient is to be found in those social occasions whose main rationale is to convey some meaning to the audience. These have recently been named *performative* action. Here, social events take the shape of dramaturgical performance, quasitheatrical spectacle. This is the most complex category among those introduced above. Its analysis has been recently taken up by Jeffrey Alexander, following in the footsteps of Erwin Goffman.^{6,32} Social performance assumes some underlying cultural script (or framework), like myth, oral tradition or a written text. This script is realized by social actors who aim at conveying its content to the audience. They attempt to convince the audience that they are truthful and authentic. The audience is expected to believe and identify with the actors. The scenic action is taking place at some stage and actors use iconic

attributes and props which are intended to sharpen the message. On stage the script begins to 'walk and talk' as Alexander puts it. It is how culture really exists (as opposed to its dormant existence in texts). Or as a cultural anthropologist observed long ago about primitive religion: it is not thought but danced and sung.²⁹

The perspectives of a new perspective

The sociology of everyday life is not a new discipline or subfield of sociology. Rather, it is a new perspective, an angle of vision that allows us to see all issues of sociology in a new light.^{30,31} It does not replace the first and the second sociology. It would be absurd to suggest that all sociologists now have to turn to the study of everyday life. The history of the humanities does not follow a pattern of rejection and replacement. The new paradigms do not invalidate the old, but added themselves to them, thus cumulatively enriching our vision. The sociology of everyday life proposes to add the study of social events at the most real, obvious and banal level of everyday life to the analysis of complex abstractions, social systems, structures and social actions. It claims that such abstractions find their embodiment and realisation in the episodes of everyday life. And therefore they are best to be perceived, observed, recorded, right here. It is here that we find social inequality, classes, power, globalization, identity, modernization, the civilizing process and all other issues that are central to sociology. And what makes such a study particularly attractive is that most of social life at this level is visible, observable, and therefore may open itself to the attractive and productive visual techniques, including photography, on which I have put a special emphasis. The sociology of everyday life provides a promising approach to the yet unresolved secrets of social existence. It suggests a certain general theoretical agenda from which I would like to select four problems. First, the role of various social bonds and various forms of community in the functioning of society. Second, the creative urge of human nature, with its incessant attempt to innovate, overcome limitations, extend horizons and to contribute to social becoming. Third, the spontaneity, emotionality, capricious and unpredictable quality of human actions, with its immanent freedom even in the face of the strongest external constraints. Fourth, the human tendency to endow the actions of oneself and those of others with meaning, to search for meaning in social life and in social organization.

It would seem as if the sociology of social existence using everyday life as its research laboratory contains the possibility to bring us closer to the solution of these perennial sociological puzzles.

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