

A View from Sociology

The Role of Solitude in Transcending Social Crises – New Possibilities for Existential Sociology

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In this chapter, I explore how people employ solitude to confront social conditions that compel them to make sense of their place in society. By attending to this effort, I hope to contribute to the discourse of existential sociology, a branch of sociology that explores how people are “selves in various states of becoming, persevering, transposing, and dying” within the society that contains them (Kotarba & Fontana, 1984, p. viii). Specifically, my chapter aims to make visible the role solitude plays when prominent intellectuals draw their conclusions about the social world. The *atmosphere* of solitude as experienced by subjects – its existentializing moments – is a neglected area of study even though, as will be evident, it contains rich insights about how the self internalizes the human condition and material consequences of existing in society. By illuminating their narratives about society, I explain how the narratives fuse individuals and society in ways that are “structurally interdependent ... interpenetrating,” an attribute already addressed by Edward Tiryakian in his timeless work *Sociologism and existentialism* (1962, p. 52). Indeed, for existentially oriented sociologists, the self assembles itself *in response* to society, an incisive observation made by Joseph Kotarba and Andrea Fontana in their important work *Existential self in society* (1984). For Kotarba and Fontana, “the existential self is the product of both experience *and* [italics added] the language used to render that experience understandable” (Kotarba & Fontana, 1984, p. xii). By exploring self and society where the line is blurred between the two, one of the founding figures of sociology, Émile Durkheim, notes: “We cannot live without representing to ourselves the world and the objects which fill it,” and by virtue of those representations, “we get attached to the world at the same time that we get attached to ourselves” (cited in Tiryakian, 1962, p. 48).

Because the discourse of existential sociology has yet to fully give an anatomy to conditions of solitude where existentializing is posited to occur, I begin by critiquing how the highly empirical variant of sociology tends to view society as an *outside* phenomenon. This sentiment is shared by Steven Shapin (1990), who noted that this overwhelmingly large and frequently acute entity we call society can be internalized inside individuals as well, a theme he explores in the context of seventeenth-century England. A discussion of how solitude was addressed beyond the seventeenth century follows where I discuss how social thinkers or intellectuals have attended to forced solitude in crisis situations. Particular attention will be paid to how their social narratives display existential elements of happiness, passion, and hope, along with angst, despair, and alienation, all of which provide critical *social* knowledge (Corrigan, 2008). This task, I concede, is rather challenging: a 2011 *Boston Globe* article which highlighted the transition in the social sciences toward a more favorable view of solitude still emphasized how positive experiences with solitude was one that was based on choice; that is, someone in *forced* solitude would presumably not experience its beneficial effects (Neyfakh, 2011). My penultimate task examines solitude's epistemological component of *surrender and catch* – a method propounded by sociology of knowledge¹ thinker Kurt Heinrich Wolff (1912–2003) (epistemology is that branch of philosophy that examines what knowledge is and how we come to know about this knowledge). For Wolff, surrender and catch is an epistemological method that can seize the totalizing experience and realization of one's predicament in the existence and web of life, an experience that blurs the line between self and society. Wolff noted how such episodes can stem from life experiences that are joyful *and* stressful (1976). Through Wolff, I steer readers to consider how existential social narratives generated by those experiencing solitude under crises – unbeknownst to them – are products of their own surrender and catch experiences. Finally, I note how the protagonists' social narratives, borne during compelled or forced solitude, contain important insights about the society, and the human will needed to survive it.

The *Outside* Society

One reason why the discipline of sociology has yet to fully illuminate the social narratives borne from solitude is due to the historical birth of the discipline during the Industrial Revolution. In this epoch of rapid social change and development, social thinkers maintained an anxious grip on the social world as they tried to understand the human condition within the leviathan forces of industrializing society. The process was dramatic and conflict-ridden. The ethos of modernity – mass production and consumption, rationality, efficiency, calculability – colonized the hitherto rarely contested worldviews borne from rural, religious, and traditional lives. By the nineteenth century people flocked to their respective cities, dealt with their political economies, technologies, and cultures; they were nourished

by science as well as eliminated by it through the practices of modern warfare and technological displacement of workers. This created urgency for sociologists to have totalizing conclusions about large swathes of corporeal society. The belief was that changing the social structure thus changed society and ultimately the people within it. During this period, sociologists Auguste Comte (1798–1857), Harriet Martineau (1802–1876), Karl Marx (1818–1883), Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), and Max Weber (1864–1920) all shared the view that society was primarily a phenomenon *outside* the mind. Within this framework, classical sociologists sought access to the *insides* of societies.

As sociology evolved, sociologists and their differing orientations caused the discipline to fork into two major trajectories. One, its prototypical iteration, gave pride of place to hypothesis testing and statistics to inform our understanding of social life. This branch of sociology was articulated most clearly in the historical debate in 1903 between Émile Durkheim, one who established sociology as an academic discipline, and his intellectual detractor, Gabriel Tarde. Although Tarde is considered a sociologist as well, he viewed society as an aggregate of individual dynamics. In contrast, Durkheim envisioned society as a collective output of institutions that shaped groups and thus *could not be reduced* to the individual (Damle & Candea, 2008, p. 767). The legendary 1903 debate between the two figures at Paris' *École des Hautes Études Sociales* saw Durkheim defending (and promoting) a scientific sociology where societies could “be measured, their relative sizes compared ... [to] study of a world hitherto unknown, different from those explored by the other sciences. This world is nothing if not a system of realities” (Damle & Candea, p. 764).

Durkheim's positivism was further explicated in *The elementary forms of religious life*, first published in 1912, where he argued how religion was not a personally spiritual phenomenon, but the “most powerful combination of physical and moral forces” that raises *groups* of people to “a higher plane of existence and transforms them” (Durkheim, 2008, p. 446; Tiryakian, 1962, p. 23). It should be noted, however, that his close contemporaries did the same in their theorizations. In 1848 Karl Marx's *Communist manifesto* confidently predicted that communism would unfetter workers from their exploited status and that they would *become* and *be* something more than their exploited group status under bourgeois domination. Max Weber (1968) saw how the calculability and mechanistic demands of modern society created an *iron cage* of rationality of which those in society should be weary. Harriet Martineau (1837/2009, 1838/2012) conducted her two most important empirical studies in the United States and noted how general laws exist about society and discussed the necessary methods to be employed to uncover new means of existences for women and humankind.

The alternative sociological discourse culturally and interpretivistically documented society's symbolisms for its constituents. By the late 1960s, through Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's seminal work, *The social construction of reality* (1967), the foundations of social constructionism found enough traction to make the claim that our *realities* are social constructions of particular periods.

Harnessing symbols, interpretations, and meanings rather than arithmetic, Berger and Luckmann demystified a reified objective society. However, this discontent with a cold objectivity was not new. Approximately three decades previous, thinkers of the Frankfurt School – Herbert Marcuse (1964), Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1944), and Erich Fromm (1994), to name but a few – expressed their major disappointments with the cold objectivism of modernity and its fetishism of science and technological development. Peering back at humankind and its horrible endeavors during the two World Wars, only to be faced with the threat of nuclear annihilation with the Cold War that followed, their cumulative sentiments indicted a humanity that was perceived to be far from civilized in spite of their modern technological developments.

During the 1970s, iterations of social constructionism manifested through the poststructural discourse that employed the methodology of deconstructing social structure, especially culture and language. Through sociologists such as Michel Foucault (1988, 1995), Jean Baudrillard (1998), and Stuart Hall (1997), deconstruction rendered society's social structure as one that could be confronted and eviscerated. This discourse responded to a growing consensus that history was not going to inevitably be on the worker's side (per Karl Marx) and that society was no longer a totalizing iron cage of rationality (per Max Weber). Instead, room was made for feminist discourse, ethnic/racial narratives, and cultural theories that conceptualized social change and group empowerment from the bottom-up rather than from the system downward. With such diversified sociological articulations, healthy tensions created disciplinary richness and symbiosis. Sociology accepted these divergent paths, sometimes grudgingly, perhaps because they operated on different sides of the same epistemological coin. Why this divergence transpired is due to an acute awareness by all sociologists that society's institutions and stimuli are exponentially bigger than the self. Society's interwoven social structures – culture, social class, religion, gender, ethnicity/race, and economy – and all its satellite institutions and traditions script us for much of our daily lives at all levels of the human experience. In its wake, sociological themes on social problems and inequalities became ones that were intersected by different identities and exigencies, acceptable in its complexities.

Socio-solitude in Seventeenth-Century England

Given the entanglements within society between its historical *zeitgeist*, the material consequences affecting the human condition, and those affecting social thinkers, we need to explore the content of their existential narratives about a continuously evolving social world. Sociologist Steven Shapin (1990) undertook the task in a brilliant exegesis that examined historical figures of seventeenth-century England, all of whom provided critical social narratives while in solitude. Shapin notes how upon examining the accounts of the period, one does not “have to listen hard” to

hear the “hermit’s voice” (p. 208). Shapin notes how during this period, “everywhere, there are voices claiming to speak from solitude, reporting on the solitary state, commenting on social life, as it were, from the other side” (p. 208).

In “The mind is its own place,” Shapin highlights iconic figures of the period that reveal to us their acquired profundities resulting from experiences with solitude. Shapin first concentrates his discussion on the themes invoked by protagonists experiencing an apolitical solitude, embodied in the voices of romantics, poets, and even aristocrats. For example, Shapin cites how poet John Keats experienced inspiration in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” when he was “alone and palely loitering” by his “solitary hearth.” Percy Bysshe Shelley, on the other hand, celebrated in “Alastor: Or, the spirit of solitude” how the character in the poem “lived ... died” and “sung in solitude”; similarly, English romantic poet William Wordsworth wrote in “I wandered lonely as a cloud”: “For oft, when on my couch I lie, in vacant or in pensive mood, they flash upon that inward eye, which is the bliss of solitude” (p. 192).

For Shapin, some of the most “far-reaching methodological insights of the Scientific Revolution ... have been secured in solitude” (1990, p. 194). Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727) – considered by many to be the most influential scientist who ever lived – delinked himself from the bonhomie of Cambridge University’s social and academic life during his formative period of scholarship (Burt, 2001; Shapin, 1990; Westfall, 1980). One of Newton’s most respected biographers, Richard Westfall, documented how Newton spent over 35 years in virtual seclusion at Cambridge’s Trinity College, where he “formed no single friendship that played a perceptible role in his life from among his fellow students” (Westfall, p. 75). Even upon acquiring fame, “none of his fellow students left any recorded mention that they had once known him.” For Westfall, the “silent, thinking lad ... had become the solitary and dejected scholar of Cambridge” (1980, p. 75). Between 1661 and 1696, Newton would only emerge from solitude in instances compelling enough for him to respond to queries and detractions to his writings. The author of the epic 1687 work *Principia* that revolutionized science and mathematics, Newton seldom left his chamber and frequently ate alone in the confines of his room. For Westfall, Newton would have preferred “to be left alone permanently” (1980, p. 377).

For Shapin, solitude provided insight “as much for historical actors as for the historian” (1990, p. 193). Shapin also transplanted his analyses across time to the eighteenth century to include philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). Jean Jacques Rousseau’s final work, *Reveries of the solitary walker* (1980), saw him reflect on his status as a philosopher immersed in his solitude – surprisingly not in the ecology of the natural environment, but within the concrete jungle of Paris. Divided into 10 chapters labeled as “Walks,” Rousseau noted in his First Walk how he had given himself over “entirely to the pleasure of conversing” with his soul “since this is the only pleasure that men cannot take away” from him. In the First Walk, he finds resolution on those who lambasted his idealistic paeans on egalitarianism: “If by meditating on my inner life I am able to order it better ... my meditations will not be entirely in vain Thinking of the prize my heart deserved,

I shall forget my misfortunes, my persecutors and my disgrace” (Rousseau, 1980, p. 32). By the Third Walk, Rousseau critically observes of social thinkers:

I have met many...who were more learned in their philosophising, but their philosophy remained as it were external to them... They studied human nature in order to speak knowledgeably about it, not in order to know themselves; their efforts were directed to the instruction of others and not to their own inner enlightenment. (1980, pp. 48–49)

Rousseau’s *dénouement* on the human dynamics of society is perhaps exemplified in the statement: “I became a solitary or, as they say, an unsociable misanthropist, because I prefer the harshest solitude to the society of malicious men which thrives only on treachery and hate” (1980, p. 112).

Shapin also traversed into the nineteenth century to discuss social thinkers and their potent critiques of society in the United States, American transcendentalist poet Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) was driven to assess his place in society by retreating for 2 years to Walden Pond, MA, in 1845. In the fifth chapter of *Walden* titled *Solitude*, Thoreau delighted in how solitude allowed the whole body to be in “one sense” as he goes and comes “with a strange liberty in Nature,” becoming “a part of herself” (1854/2011, p. 69). Thoreau did drolly concede how his initial fears of the woods was analogous to how people were “still a little afraid of the dark, though the witches are all hung, and Christianity and candles have been introduced” (1854/2011, p. 69). Thoreau’s solitary “recovery” in the woods resulted in an incisive critique of society, allowing him to display a quasi-ethnographic sociological imagination, a type of sociological insight that allows the observer “the capacity to shift from one perspective to another, and in the process to build up an adequate view of a total society and of its components” (Mills, 1959, p. 211). For Thoreau:

Society is commonly too cheap. We meet at very short intervals, not having had time to acquire any new value for each other... We have had to agree on a certain set of rules, called etiquette...to make this frequent meeting tolerable...we live thick and are in each other’s way, and stumble over one another... Certainly less frequency would suffice for all important and hearty communications... It would be better if there were but one inhabitant to a square mile, as where I live. (2011, p. 71)

In solitude, thinkers often explore emancipatory mechanisms for removing socially limiting conditions. Some find it in a quiet room, while others find it outdoors in their favorite ecosystems. Solitude’s ostensible birthing of great ideas notwithstanding, it appears that social thinkers having experienced solitary reflections are quite adept at critically commenting on social life and society. Indeed, for Shapin, these narratives have emerged “with remarkable consistency in our culture” (Shapin, 1990, p. 209). The consistency of solitude’s contribution to social critique stems from how intermittent delinking provides the distance needed

for social thinkers to observe clearly. These dynamics may not be readily explicit in the *immediate* context of social life because cultural, class, political, ethnic, gender, and technological stimuli are so numerous. It is in this regard that solitude for the thinker serves as a “place of knowledge ... the setting for profound understanding of both self and society” (Shapin, pp. 192–193).

Beyond the Seventeenth Century: Solitude and Crises

Beyond the seventeenth century, examples of iconic figures with solitude-inspired social narratives about existential and political crises abound. Arguably, one of the more explicit explorations of crisis since the seventeenth century can be found in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). As one of the most important existential thinkers of his time as well as ours, Nietzsche’s solitary summers in the small Swiss village of Sils Maria ultimately produced classic works such as *Thus spoke Zarathustra* (1883–1885), *Beyond good and evil* (1886/2011), and *Twilight of the idols* (1889/2009b). Many of his social critiques attended to how one can confront what he saw as the crisis of humanity. Nietzsche’s formulations about the crisis of humanity indicted a society with a failed Christianity, where God was dead – where its practitioners and their distorted practices destroyed God – and how there needed to be a project of human emancipation based on new value systems that could replace older value systems. Nietzsche referred to this process as the *transvaluation of values*, a phrase which found much textual exposition in *The Anti-Christ* (Nietzsche, 2010). For English novelist Will Self, the transvaluation of values was essentially a “systematized destruction of systems” (Chu, Morgan, & Wardle, 1999). The process of abolishing society’s old value system required the need to have a *will to power* that could allow the self to master life in the guise of being an exponentially capable human being – an *übermensch* – that could overcome all of life’s brutal challenges and hardships.

It would be a mistake to conceive of Nietzsche’s ideas as purely atmospheric, sloganeered in a hyperromantic world that rarely dealt with the hard material consequences of life. Indeed, Friedrich Nietzsche was unlike John Keats or William Wordsworth. He suffered from a variety of serious illnesses such as syphilis and diphtheria, with Sax (2003) going as far as noting that he suffered meningioma, or brain tumors. Whatever the cause, during Nietzsche’s relatively short life, he drew a variety of philosophical conclusions from his suffering, most notably that existential empowerment – that power in us to continue living and existing in society– must be understood in relation to the body. To live his philosophy, Nietzsche embarked on many solitary sojourns at a variety of idyllic settings, adopting strict physical regimens to improve his physical health (Chu, Morgan, & Wardle, 1999). Thus, human emancipation, for Nietzsche, was about self-mastery of the mental with physical selves, a process that required one to be an *übermensch*.

In one of his more famous proclamations from *Ecce Homo*, published posthumously in 1908, Nietzsche noted how “Philosophy, as I have so far understood and lived it, means living voluntarily among ice and high mountains—seeking out everything strange and questionable in existence, everything so far placed under a ban by morality” (2009a, p. 4). Such an account can be appreciated for its metaphorical value alone, yet Nietzsche did ascend some of the peaks of the Swiss Alps, such as Piz Corvatsch, at a daunting 11,322 ft, in hopes of enhancing metaphysical and physical strength, molding his will to power in the process (Botton, 2001). During his solitary sojourns up the mountains, he wrote of how mountain air was the “air of the heights” where “the ice is near, the solitude ... immense—but how peacefully everything lies in the light” (2009, p. 4). Additionally, Nietzsche’s other famous work, *Human all too human* (1878), was begun in the solitude of the Swiss countryside he so loved.

Another treatment of solitude by Nietzsche’s can be seen in *Zarathustra*. Vicariously living through the prophet, Nietzsche illuminates how Zarathustra relied on solitude for three purposes. First, Nietzsche saw solitude as a place for meditation and reflection that invariably leads to the point where, upon being bloated with wisdom, one must leave the state and share with society the knowledge and insights acquired. Indeed, the work begins with Zarathustra descending from the mountains after 10 years where in spite of “his solitude ... [he] did not tire of it” (2006b, p. 3). But because of his love for humanity, Zarathustra – metaphorically treating solitude as the sea – decided to “climb ashore” to spread his wisdom (p. 4). The second treatment of solitude for Nietzsche was how it functioned as a place to return to for healing, especially after being exposed to too much cultural detritus and stimuli from an unawakened society. This function of solitude is exemplified with dicta such as “Flee, my friend, into your solitude! I see you dazed by the noise of the men” (p. 36). Also, Zarathustra advises listeners – especially those who belonged to the “herd” – to “go into isolation” as a means to “seek the way to yourself” and not to be thwarted by those in the herd who made one feel guilty about isolation (p. 46). In the book, Zarathustra himself returns to the mountains frequently to reset his system, not unlike Nietzsche’s perennial summer returns to Sils Maria, to wait “like a sower who has cast his seeds” (p. 63), but only after the prophet has ensured that his listeners “have heard everything” (p. 117). Nietzsche exclaimed, through Zarathustra, “Oh solitude! You my home solitude! How blissfully and tenderly your voice speaks to me!” (p. 147).

Finally, Nietzsche, through Zarathustra and his forthright view of life, warned about solitude’s deleterious effects if harnessed incorrectly: “One day solitude will make you weary, one day your pride will cringe and ... you will cry ‘I am alone!’” (p. 47). As a place that can harbor great dangers, Zarathustra warns that “whatever one brings into solitude grows in it, even the inner beast. On this ... solitude is ill-advised for many. Was there ever anything filthier on earth than the saints of the wilderness? Around them not only hell broke loose—but pigs too” (p. 237).

Although he excelled in psychological insight about solitude, Nietzsche's social narratives made visible important social tendencies exhibited by modern societies. In *Human all too human*, he points to the capriciousness of society:

The modern spirit has come to rule in all areas, with its unrest, its hatred of moderation and limitation, at first unleashed by the fever of revolution, and then, when attacked by dear and dread of itself, applying the reins to itself again. (Nietzsche, 2006a, p. 167)

Insofar as humanity's reliance on the state is concerned, Nietzsche cautions that "the state is a clever institution for protecting individuals from one another; if one goes too far in ennobling it, the individual is ultimately weakened by it, even dissolved" (2006a, p. 183). More importantly was Nietzsche's view on war, which he saw as the "sleep or wintertime of culture" (2006a, p. 271). Moreover, in his criticisms against revolutionaries who believed in overthrowing old societies for the establishment of new ones, Nietzsche wrote that "An overthrow can well be a source of energy in an exhausted human race, but it can never be an organizer, architect, artist, perfecter of the human character" (2006a, p. 281). Nietzsche, however, spared the institution of science from vitriol since it had "as its goal the least pain and the longest life possible—that is, a kind of eternal happiness ... a very modest kind in comparison with the promises of religions" (2006a, p. 105).

Arthur Koestler (1905–1983), Hungarian-Jewish philosopher, author, and novelist, had experiences with forced solitude that brought him face-to-face with death. While covering the Spanish Civil War as a journalist, he was captured by nationalist Francisco Franco's troops in early 1937, suspected of being a left-wing sympathizer. Sentenced to death, Koestler spent months in prison until June of the same year. Although only disclosed after his imprisonment for obvious reasons, Koestler was indeed a member of the Communist Party of Germany, and his assigned interview of Franco as a journalist was done on behalf of the *Comintern*,² using the London-based newspaper *News Chronicle* "as a cover" (Koestler, 1966, p. 5). Koestler wrote about harrowing nights waiting execution in his prison diary and through recollections after his release, which were later published in *Dialogue with death* (1966). *Dialogue* includes accounts of many nights where Koestler would hear prisoners being led away to face Franco's firing squad, uncertain if he would be next.

Ultimately freed through a prisoner exchange, Koestler survived the ordeal. *Dialogue* contains, along with psychological themes, some of the more emblematic themes that solitude during crisis includes: the narratives about society and how one survives or transcends it. Perhaps of all the narratives that most sociologically blurred the line between self and society was when Koestler hinted that the blurring was itself needed when one's future was uncertain. In such a situation, society is rendered an epic disappointment, with Koestler noting how "one is never so curious about the future of humanity as when one is locked up in an iron cage, guarded by two gorillas" (p. 91). Trapped in raw despair, Koestler noted that

“the only consolation you could give to a condemned man on his way to the electric chair would be to tell him a comet was on the way which would destroy the world the very next day,” blurring the distinction between global catastrophe with the absolute extinction of the individual (p. 92).

Koestler also tried to find morsels of strength during his forced solitude. This he did by downplaying the suffering meted out to him by society: “This is why situations lived through are never so bad in reality as in imagination. Nature sees to it that trees do not grow beyond a certain height, not even the trees of suffering” (p. 117). Koestler also harnessed the acquisition of prison resources as a metaphor for social struggles in life, noting that “here inside the prison walls the struggle is waged for a cigarette, for permission to exercise in the courtyard, for the possession of a pencil. It is a struggle for minimal and unworthy objects, but a struggle for existence like any other” (1966, p. 197). After acquiring his freedom, Koestler concluded rather sociologically: “Those who uphold the Theory of Race and deny the influence of environment on the development of the human being should spend a year in prison and observe themselves daily in the mirror” (1966, p. 197).

In contrast to Koestler, the forced solitary confinement of Milada Horáková (1901–1950) ended tragically. A Czech lawyer, freedom fighter, politician, and arguably the most prominent pan-European feminist, Horáková was executed by Stalinists during the Cold War in Czechoslovakia. During her youth, Horáková was active in resisting the Nazi Occupation of Czechoslovakia. She was ultimately captured by the Nazis, was sent to prison, and spent the remainder of World War II at Theresienstadt concentration camp located in the country. After World War II concluded, she served in the country’s parliament until the 1948 Communist takeover of the country (Doležalová, 2012; Kelly, 2012). A year later Horáková was arrested again, this time by the Communists, accused of trying to overthrow the regime, a charge that historians have unequivocally deemed as false. Subjected to brutal torture and significant time spent in solitary confinement, as well as forced to stand in the numerous sham trials orchestrated by the Stalinists throughout the Eastern Bloc during this period, she was sentenced to death on June 8, 1950.

Having written on a variety of subjects related to women’s welfare such as the quality of life of unmarried women and children born out of wedlock, as well as having drafted bills that would improve the status of women in family law and in blue-collar professions (Doležalová, 2012), her most memorable writings were not propagandistic nor based on public policy: on the night before her execution, alone in her cell, jailers allowed her to write three letters (Kelly, 2012). The powerfully poignant letters were written to her husband Bohuslav, teenage daughter Jana, and Horáková’s mother-in-law, who would be Jana’s caretaker upon her mother’s demise. One could only imagine the depth of Horáková’s inventory-taking about her life, uncluttered in the fateful hours before her demise. Yet her writings during this difficult period speak volumes about the effects *and* redemption of forced

solitude. Horáková's letter for Jana included an important section – Horáková's social *denouement* – that instructed Jana about the ways of society:

Don't be frightened and sad because I am not coming back any more. Learn, my child, to look at life early as a serious matter. Life is hard, it does not pamper anybody, and for every time it strokes you it gives you ten blows. Become accustomed to that soon, but don't let it defeat you. Decide to fight. (Kelly, 2012)

Elsewhere in the letter, Horáková wrote:

You know that to organize one's scale of values well means to know not only oneself well, to be firm in the analysis of one's character, but mainly to know ... others, to know as much of the world as possible, its past, present, and future development. (Kelly, 2012)

In her last paragraph to Jana, Horáková instructs, "Just one more thing: Choose your friends carefully. Among other things one is also very much determined by the people with whom one associates. Therefore choose very carefully" (Kelly, 2012). Horáková's letter to her husband and mother-in-law contains topics that highlight the expectations of liberated womanhood that still had to contend with the *second shift*, noted by sociologist Arlie Hochschild in her eponymous work (1989). The second shift refers to the angst and human condition that accompany women with a successful career, yet one that has to return to a home to fulfill her archaic duties as a wife, a state that resulted for women that had yet to be fully emancipated from traditionally defined scripts for the home. Horáková's outpourings about how her loved ones should function in society, drafted alone before her execution, are indicative of solitude's blurring of self and society at work, predating Hochschild's observations of the phenomenon, and having taken place not behind the gendered discontents of American capitalism, but behind the Iron Curtain and its totalitarian institutions.

At 2:30 a.m. on June 27, 1950, Horáková was hanged with others in spite of appeals by Winston Churchill, Albert Einstein, Eleanor Roosevelt, Bertrand Russell, and many others. As an anti-Nazi and anti-Communist crusader, Horáková's political stance was simultaneously an apolitical one under forced solitude, one that brought her back to womanhood, society, and humanity as a whole.

Solitude, seen in our cast of iconic thinkers and activists, can be a foundational platform for a variety of insights into society, whether forced, as in the experiences of Koestler and Horáková, or voluntary, as in the reflections and meditations of Thoreau, Rousseau, and Nietzsche. Interestingly, even when those in forced solitude are confronted with their existential demise, their narratives about society are not by default cynical. Not surprisingly there is urgency, but one that is not necessarily purely based on a paralyzing fear or desperate self-serving outbursts for life. Rather, the narratives generated by Koestler and Horáková exhibit traits of self-reassurance and a calm fatalism. In Horáková's case, room was made for the continuity of family and carefully cultivated friendships. In the case of voluntary solitude, the relative lack of urgency was countered by wisdom, albeit sprinkled with some

histrionics and hyperbole, on how to live and resolve oneself *vis-à-vis* the discontents of existing society. Such sentiments can be found in Thoreau, Rousseau, and Nietzsche's ideas. Indeed, their profundities about self and society could not have found articulation without their solitary sojourns into their ecologies of contemplation, such as Walden Pond for Thoreau, Paris for Rousseau, and Sils Maria and Piz Corvatsch for Nietzsche.

Surrender and Catch

Thus far, I hope to have described how solitude can, through those that choose to or are forced to experience it, generate profundities about human existence in society. With existential cues in abundance, especially in greater degrees by those experiencing crisis, we begin to understand the sociological depth offered by solitude-inspired thinkers of the human condition, the kind that is needed for the self to survive not only itself but also a society that can steer people toward redemption or oblivion. But what allows for this social knowledge, that is, what are the mechanisms? I propose that their social knowledge results from episodes of surrender and catch, which Kurt Wolff has presciently identified and then developed into a qualitative methodology for knowledge production (1962, 1974, 1976).

As a qualitative method, Wolff's surrender and catch is an infrequently applied method in American sociology even though Wolff himself hailed from a distinguished cadre of German sociologists that migrated to the United States during the late 1930s. Surrender and catch's utility for considering the different nuances of solitude renders it an important tool for explaining how we find certainty in knowing and why we are so certain that what is consequentially known is, from our perspective, *truth*. In his conceptualization of surrender, Wolff illuminates that totalizing state of knowledge and "expansion of consciousness," an awakening from event(s) that builds one's epistemological and ontological knowledge about one's *raison d'être* in society, life, and beyond (Wolff, 1976, p. 63). That is, Wolff noted that in times of totalizing inspiration, "words burst forth in a newly emergent poetic meaning from the immediacy of experience, as they do in surrender, [and] we have a sense of what we are talking about" (Backhaus & Psathas, 2007, p. xxv). In the total experience of surrender, there is the "dialectic of 'die and become'" (Wolff, 1962, p. 47). Or, as told by Wolff's biographers:

The experience of surrender can be explicated through its components: total involvement, the suspension of received notions, pertinence of everything ... that the surrenderer's whole being is involved in the experience such that the subjects-object distinction disappears. (Backhaus & Psathas, 2007, p. xxv)

Following from this, Wolff's rendition of the catch is when the experiencer is able to see the "structure that emerges from it" (1974, p. 549); it is that "yield, harvest ...

necessarily emerging structure” that is seized upon to validate reality (p. 318). This is where surrender and catch’s methodological utility emerges. Wolff notes in his seminal work *Surrender and catch: Experience and inquiry today* (1976) that “as a method it is characterized by openness toward its origin . . . it is self-correcting and therefore, in the spirit of the essence of knowledge,” one that is inherently existential (1976, p. 79). Wolff pushes the parameter of epistemology even further by noting how scientific findings are but theoretical and relative, while existential truth about the human condition is “absolute—also philosophical, artistic, poetic, if you will” (1976, p. 79). Thus, Wolff’s courageous response to the timeless query on truth is that when we experience surrender and catch, we “*are thrown back on what we really are, which is what we share with mankind* [italics added]” (p. 54). Tiryakian observed this human condition over a decade earlier as well: “As societies grow larger in area and denser in population and as individual differences multiply the time will come when the only thing members of a society will have in common is that they are human” (Tiryakian, 1962, p. 56).

Surrender and catch is thus a process that amplifies social awareness beyond self-actualization. The lucidity allows for a departure from socially constructed boundaries in ways that allow the experiencer a “certainty of full communication with his fellow men,” and “as long as his experience lasts, he can convey anything, and he who listens cannot help but understand” (Wolff, 1962, p. 40). Indeed, the experiencer thrown back on what is shared with humanity is thus forced to acknowledge that, in the final instance, the self invariably belongs to the human race.

To understand how Wolff came upon such an approach requires us to understand the social dislocations and crises that affected him. During the pre-World War II period, Wolff’s life was one of a transnational European. Born in Darmstadt, Germany, he ultimately had to flee Germany in 1933 because of its nascent fascism. Settling in Italy, he was again forced to flee in 1939 with his wife, Carla Bruck, as a result of Mussolini’s sycophancy to Hitler. After a brief furlough in England, the Wolff’s migrated to the United States. All the while the Holocaust unfolded and climaxed in ways that would scar Wolff for the rest of his life. Not surprisingly Wolff thus found no comfort in postwar modernity: with the conclusion of World War II, the Cold War was born and the threat of nuclear annihilation suddenly became very real. For Wolff, the sociological neglect of the Holocaust and his concerns at the time that there may indeed be a nuclear war became tropes for the crisis of humanity, themes that, “far more than any other, shaped his thinking” (Kalberg, 2007, p. 79). In this regard Wolff insisted that social theory must be adequate to confront the existence of evil. However, Wolff did not believe that the social sciences, as *science*, adequately addressed this important theme of social existence (Gordon, 2007, p. 67). Wolff’s scions note in affirmation:

Modern science brought with it the project of predicting, controlling, and manipulating the natural world. Its project was to discover the principles of linear causality, or natural laws, by which all phenomena are to be reduced . . . Wolff rejects this

modern form of reason that denies the unique transcendent(al) capacities of humankind. (Backhaus & Psathas, 2007, p. 77)

By failing to account for the atrocities of humankind, science also failed to account for the human capacity to “create new meaning [and] existential truth on the basis of transcending socio-historically conditioned everyday life” (Backhaus & Psathas, 2007, p. 77). Surrender and catch was thus a necessary method that allowed Wolff and his proponents to confront the “tragic contradictions of history” (Godway, 2007, p. 83). Through surrender and catch, Wolff was able to conduct a historical diagnosis of the human condition – its meanings and material consequences – all through the conduit of the individual whose discernment from society is blurred (Stehr, 2007, p. 55).

Surrender and catch’s distinguishing feature is its methodological acceptance of profundities that displace traditional ideas about what constitutes knowledge (Backhaus & Psathas, 2007). One such profundity was found in Wolff’s experience with the Holocaust, and his surrender and catch aimed therefore at mining for cues about the human condition that, for Kalberg (2007, p. 79), could be harnessed to demolish the “invidious dualisms at the foundation of the Holocaust.” For Kalberg, such dualisms, as in “German and Jews, Germans and Gypsies, Germans and Communists—called forth the greatest evil. ‘Surrender’ reacts with unequivocal clarity, forcefulness, and horror against dualisms” (2007, p. 79).

Wolff’s epistemology thus emancipated qualitative sociological methods from its status as arguably the “softest” sociological method in an already “soft” science. He accomplished this by situating humankind in systemic crises, “hard” events that forged characters and thinkers who confronted worlds that collapsed around them. Such an approach was predictably beyond the purview of positivist approaches that rendered subjects into objects and, more inimically, separated facts from values, a divorce that resulted in, again, those dualisms whose political appropriation, as in “us” versus “them,” resulted in the insanity of war and genocide. For Wolff and his sociology of knowledge, such a divorce is unacceptable because facts and values are indelibly intertwined into, if surrender and catch runs its course, truths that are articulated within and about a particular historical period. Indeed, for sociology and sociological research, Wolff’s assertion is that we are guided by values that operate in the selection of what is significant to research in the first place (Imber, 2007, p. 71). In this manner, method and values become inseparable to the social thinker. This appreciation Wolff did not see in American sociology after his many transplants across a variety of universities. For Kalberg:

Wolff’s sociology...has to this day been received only in fragments in the United States... American sociology remains to this day predominantly Durkheimian, Parsonian, positivist, uncritical of...modernity in any fundamental sense, and uninfluenced by the Holocaust. (Kalberg, 2007, p. 80)

It is thus not surprising that Wolff's chroniclers have described his sociology as taking an existential turn. Given that Wolff's surrender and catch stems from his lamentations of the Holocaust as a signifier for the crisis of humanity, we can begin to appreciate the frequency of surrender and catch moments that have been experienced by our contingent of social thinkers in their moments of crisis.

Existential Sociology's Enhancement Through the Study of Solitude

Using the methodology of surrender and catch allows researchers a historical link across the present and across time to social thinkers that faced increasingly acute levels of crisis – to the point where, among our gathering of protagonists, one had to pay the ultimate price with her life. In this chapter, I hoped to convey how solitude, constituted by our protagonists' surrender and catches, was able to provide a deep understanding of the human condition in society. Moreover, the power of solitude to encourage protagonists to honestly confront the nature of society so that major existential themes – happiness, passion, hope, angst, despair, and alienation – can be harnessed to transcend and/or outmaneuver systems that constrain them renders solitude an important state of being worthy of further investigation. These attributes include where solitude is being experienced, the quality of life in it, and the degree of metaphysical and literal crises that affect the well-being of the protagonist. For the sociological examination of the human experience in society, solitude becomes an indispensable site to ascertain definitive conclusions about society as well, especially by those experiencing an urgency brought forth by some kind of crisis. Whether solitude's revelations of the nature of society stems from ecology as experienced by Nietzsche at Sils Maria or atop Piz Corvatsch, or within confined spaces of imprisonment as in the experiences of Koestler and Horáková, or by an incomplete mourning of one's ilk lost through genocide as in Wolff's experience, the surrender and catches by our protagonists can inspire sociologists to employ this methodology to enhance the discourse of existential sociology. Such a method gives insight to how studying the process of existentialization during solitude is essentially about studying how inner and physical strength – a Nietzschean will to power – is needed to survive a society that has compelled the protagonist to deal with its often challenging stimuli.

In its institutional and bureaucratic manifestations, society's size *vis-à-vis* the self indeed makes analyzing the former a challenging undertaking. However, the analytical purview of positivist sociology allocates explanations about consequences for the group in ways that ignore the agency individuals have to conclusively process *all of society's dynamics within the self*. This behooves existentially oriented sociologists to take on the task of seeking out what is evinced by one's inner strength and its ability to harness agency in spite of crisis, an attribute of the human spirit that is, paradoxically, not given full explication in important genres of

sociology that examine human rights, the condition of political prisoners, veterans and their relationship to society upon returning home, and disaster studies, sociological contexts that at one time or another require solitude for the protagonist to process and to overcome. Indeed, society is ultimately dependent on the consciousness of individuals, “for it ... exists ... as long as individuals think of it. Consequently, society has the double character of being both immanent and transcendent; *it resides in the individual* [italics added] but it is also greater than the individual” (Tiryakian, 1962, p. 64). Tiryakian’s observation is most appropriate for closing our discussion since he provides great cues that existential sociology is still in the process of illuminating:

The life of a society is infinitely longer than that of any member of it—individuals are born and perish, but society continues. Since the soul is interpreted...as the incarnation (or internalization) of society, the belief that the soul is immortal is justifiable. (1962, p. 49)

It behooves social thinkers across a variety of disciplines in making the life path in society, a path that often crosses into solitude, acceptable and appreciated for all of us who continue existing and becoming in ways we are still on the verge of understanding.

Notes

- 1 The sociology of knowledge perspective views “reality” to be a product of how human thoughts *and* particular historical periods intertwine to create accounts, narratives, themes, and “objective truth” about the human condition.
- 2 The *Comintern*, or Communist International, was an international Communist organization. Founded by Vladimir Lenin in 1919, its main agenda was to forge an internationalized movement to overthrow the world’s bourgeois (capitalist) class.

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