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## Ethical Dilemmas of "Verstehen" in Sociology\* Theodore Abel's Encounter with Nazism

**Abstract:** Theodore Abel belonged before Talcott Parsons to the pioneers of "Weberians" kind in America. In his *Systematic Sociology in Germany* the first systematic exposure of Max Weber's ideas in English appeared. Abel was the first to use *Verstehen* and *Verstehende Soziologie* in English literature. Abel also pioneered the research on the Nazi phenomenon. The manifestations of nazism and communist totalitarianism in the 20th century put the sociological theory and methodology to a critical test. Examining Abel's work as a case study, it is possible to see more clearly the ethical and methodological problems of the humanistic sociology—the "understanding" or interpretative one. The sense and implications of understanding in sociology still require greater clarity in order to better understand the understanding. Abel's diary sheds light on the methodological problems of his understanding research of nazism. The source of danger and ethical dilemmas of that discipline lies in the tradition of understanding sociology and Weber's method of ideal types connected with the principle of freedom from valuation. Also in that very tradition there are beginnings for development of its rightful cause and vocation. Provided, just like in Znaniecki's concept of *humanistic coefficient*, not only meanings but also valuations and social sentiments given in people's experience are taken into account. Full understanding cannot imply complete tolerance if meanings and values of individuals and groups are coupled with hate and other hostile feelings. Social feelings—hate and love (altruism)—constitute a sociologist's axiological system of negative and positive reference.

**Keywords:** *Verstehen*, interpretative sociology, ideal types, nazism, sociological research and ethics

## Problems of Understanding

Theodore Abel,<sup>1</sup> just like Alexander von Schelting,<sup>2</sup> and Albert Salomon<sup>3</sup> belonged before Talcott Parsons to the pioneers of "Weberians" kind in America. It is worth recalling that in his *Systematic Sociology in Germany*,<sup>4</sup> besides theories of other German sociologists, the first systematic exposure of Max Weber's ideas in English ap-

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\* The first version of the paper has been presented at the 35th Biennial Congress of the International Institute of Sociology "The Moral Fabric in Contemporary Societies," Kraków, Poland, 11-16 July, 2001.

<sup>1</sup> R. Bierstedt, *Abel, Theodore*, in: David L. Sills (ed.) *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. London: The Free Press, p. 1-4.

<sup>2</sup> L. A. Coser, *Refugee Scholars in America. Their Impact and Their Experiences*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984, p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> A. Salomon, "Max Weber's Sociology." *Social Research*, vol. I, 1935, No 1, p. 60-73.

<sup>4</sup> T. Abel, *Systematic Sociology in Germany: A Critical Analysis of Some Attempts to Establish Sociology as an Independent Science*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1929.

peared. There were since confusing reports<sup>5</sup> indicating that during the 1930s Weber was known to American scientists only thanks to the translations done by Frank Knight<sup>6</sup> and Talcott Parsons,<sup>7</sup> and that the first work devoted to Weber's concepts was Lowell L. Bennion's dissertation.<sup>8</sup> Passing over Abel's contribution in silence can only lead to fixing the deformed picture of sociological thought development in the first half of the 20th century.<sup>9</sup> It is not quite true that the four chapters of Parson's *Structure of Social Action*<sup>10</sup> provided American sociologists with the "[...] first and lasting understanding of Weber [...]"<sup>11</sup> Emphasis will be put here on the contribution of an American scholar of Polish origin to the development of cosmopolitan scholarly discourse<sup>12</sup> upon problems of understanding (*Verstehen*) outlined by Weber.

After World War I Abel was for a brief time (in Posen) a student of Florian Znaniecki, who was developing culturalistic sociology, and later a collaborator of Robert M. MacIver, who practiced "meaningful sociology" at Columbia University. Hence, through competent reception and criticism of sociological ideas he participated in creating the so-called interpretative paradigm.

Abel also pioneered the research on the Nazi phenomenon. The manifestations of nazism and communist totalitarianism in the 20th century put the sociological theory and methodology to a critical test. Examining Abel's work as a case study, it is possible to see more clearly the ethical and methodological problems of the humanistic sociology—the "understanding" or interpretative one. Especially relevant in this respect are journals left by Abel,<sup>13</sup> mirroring his orientation in the world and in science. That exceptional output of Abel deserves a careful reading because it contributes also to the development of reflexive, critical self-consciousness of sociologists after the Holocaust.<sup>14</sup>

Before the notion "interpretative sociology" came into use, the expression "understanding sociology" or *Verstehende Soziologie* had been commonly used. It is

<sup>5</sup> L. N. DiPadova and R. S. Brower, "A Piece of Lost History: Max Weber and Lowell L. Bennion," *American Sociologist*, Fall 1992, vol. 23, no. 3, p. 37–56. The author is indebted to Professor Herbert Gans from Columbia University for pointing to that paper.

<sup>6</sup> M. Weber, *General Economic History*, trans. by Frank Knight. London: Allen and Unwin, 1927.

<sup>7</sup> M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by Talcott Parsons. London: Allen and Unwin, 1930.

<sup>8</sup> L. L. Bennion, *Max Weber's Methodology*. Paris: Les Presses Modernes, 1933.

<sup>9</sup> See E. Hataś, "How Robert M. MacIver Was Forgotten: Columbia and American Sociology in a New Light, 1929–1950," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 37 (1) p. 27–43.

<sup>10</sup> Talcott Parsons quotes Theodore Abel's work expressing the opinion that Abel's interpretation of Weber's idea was of positivist nature. See T. Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*. New York: The Free Press, 1968, p. 630–641.

<sup>11</sup> L. N. DiPadova and R. S. Brower, "A Piece of Lost History: Max Weber and Lowell L. Bennion," *American Sociologist*, Fall 1992, vol. 23, No 3, p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> H. Znaniecki-Lopata, "Florian Znaniecki and the Cosmopolitan Community of Scholars," in: E. Hataś (ed.), *Florian Znaniecki's Sociological Theory and the Challenges of the 21st Century*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 2000, p. 171–200.

<sup>13</sup> T. Abel, *The Columbia Circle of Scholars. Selections from the Journal (1930–1957)*. Edited and Introduced by Elżbieta Hataś. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> R. Fine, Ch. Turner (eds.), *Social Theory after the Holocaust*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000.

not rare to find still this German term.<sup>15</sup> The concept of *Verstehen* retains its original German form as partly untranslatable and unique.<sup>16</sup> Abel was the first to use *Verstehen* and *Verstehende Soziologie* in English literature.<sup>17</sup> He did it in his above-mentioned doctoral dissertation *Systematic Sociology in Germany*. In his subsequent widely quoted article *The Operation Called "Verstehen"*,<sup>18</sup> analyzing Weber's theories, he gave that term a special meaning. *Verstehen* was to consist in motivational understanding of human actions, in understanding subjective factors in social actions.<sup>19</sup> Abel suggested that the term "hermeneutics" be a separate one from *Verstehen* referring to the different kind of cultural and historical understanding. *Verstehen*, according to Abel, would mean motivational understanding based on using general, intersubjective rules that he called "maxims of behavior." In his later works, however, he would stress the complementarity of hermeneutics and *Verstehen*.<sup>20</sup>

The critics, not unfittingly, pointed out that the concept of *Verstehen* presented by Abel was positivistic; it assumed the objective observer's perspective.<sup>21</sup> The article about *Verstehen* was republished—not without a reason—in the selection of text by authors<sup>22</sup> supporting the methodological unity of empirical sciences, as exemplified by Carl G. Hempel.<sup>23</sup> One may notice a certain evolution of Abel's views. Later on he specified the rules of behavior (maxims) more precisely as contextually, historically and culturally conditioned. He explained that he did not intend to put motivational understanding (*Verstehen I*) in opposition to interpretative, contextual understanding of culture and history that he called respectively *Verstehen II*.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>15</sup> H. Helle, *Verstehende Soziologie. Lehrbuch*. München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1999.

<sup>16</sup> Ph. Pettit, "Verstehen," in: John B. Davis, D. Wade Hands and Uskali Mäki (eds.), *The Handbook of Economic Methodology*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.

<sup>17</sup> T. Abel, "A Reply to Professor [Murray L.] Wax," *Society and Sociological Research*, 51: 1967, p. 334–336. (334)

<sup>18</sup> T. Abel, "The Operation Called Verstehen," *American Journal of Sociology* 1948, No 54, p. 211–218.

<sup>19</sup> Talcott Parsons points out that Abel translated German "Handeln" as "behavior" which in his opinion did not satisfactorily expressed the meaning closer to action. See T. Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*. New York: The Free Press, 1968, p. 641.

<sup>20</sup> T. Abel, "A Reply to Professor Wax," *Sociology and Social Research*, Vol. 51, April 1967, No 3, p. 334–336. On various standpoints see G. Ritzer, *Sociological Theory*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000, p. 113–113.

<sup>21</sup> Th. McCarthy, "On Misunderstanding 'Understanding,'" *Theory and Decision. An International Journal for Philosophy and Methodology of the Social Sciences*, 1973, vol. 3, nr 4, p. 359–370.

<sup>22</sup> T. Abel, *The Operation Called Verstehen*, in: *Theorie und Realität. Ausgewählte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftstheorie und Sozialwissenschaften*. Herausgegeben von Hans Albert. Mit Beiträgen von Theodore Abel, Ernst Nagel, Karl E. R. Popper, Ernst Topitsch et al., Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1964, p. 177–188.

<sup>23</sup> C. G. Hempel, "Typological Methods in the Social Sciences," in: *Theorie und Realität. Ausgewählte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftstheorie und Sozialwissenschaften*. Herausgegeben von Hans Albert. Mit Beiträgen von Theodore Abel, Ernst Nagel, Karl E. R. Popper, Ernst Topitsch et al., Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1964, p. 191–208.

<sup>24</sup> T. Abel, "Verstehen I and Verstehen II," *Theory and Decisions. An International Journal for Philosophy and Methodology of the Social Sciences*, 1975, No 6, p. 99–102.

The problems of understanding discussed here is extremely complex.<sup>25</sup> I will therefore concentrate on the methodological problem of objectivization of understanding which for Abel was a main issue. Consequently obeying Weber's principle of avoiding valuation, Abel did not reckon fully with the ethical issues with which a sociologist is incessantly confronted. The issue is crucial and admonishing.

In his early theoretical work Abel, following Weber, noticed that there are social actions that cannot be understood completely,<sup>26</sup> that stray away from typical forms of motivation, be it because of goals or emotions, as in case of fanaticism. However, as I will show below, Abel did not take that problem into consideration in his study of nazism. Like Weber, he concentrated on intellectual understanding of rational behavior, i.e., behavior logically consistent by the use of proper (in a given situation) means of achieving a goal. Emotional understanding, on the other hand, emerges in projecting individual consciousness and individual emotional experience, in empathic understanding of emotional context. Those two types of understanding (ways of understanding) should not be confused with two kinds of understanding: actual understanding ("in order to" motive in action) and explanatory understanding ("because of" motive in action). Similarly to Abel, that thread of intentional analysis of actions conducted by Weber was subsequently taken up by Alfred Schütz who consolidated a certain canon of understanding in interpretative sociology grounded in structures of typifications.

The way Abel approached the problem of *Verstehen* as seen in his early explanation of Weber's thought deserves particular attention because at that period he was sceptical toward a possibility of valid interpretation of motives either by the agent, or by the observer.

"The analysis of the ways and kinds of understanding explain the general nature and process of understanding but do not throw enough light on the question how the actual meanings in a given case are ascertained. The intrinsic meaning presents essentially a logical problem but the discovery of motives is a fundamental methodological question in the social sciences.

Weber has not attempted to solve this question, except that he has pointed out that the outcome of a behavior-sequence may sometimes offer an adequate clue to the underlying motivation but he believes that interpretation in terms of motives will always be of a more or less hypothetical character. Because of rationalizations and repression, even the frankest self-confession can be only of relative value. Besides, the mere fact that a given situation seems to the observer to be adequately explained by assuming the presence of a certain motive, is not sufficient to establish the validity of interpretation. It is often the case that a different motive or a set of motives would make the situation equally understandable."<sup>27</sup> (emph. E. H.)

<sup>25</sup> A. Bronk, "Rozumienie jako kategoria poznawcza w naukach społecznych" [Understanding as a Cognitive Category in the Social Sciences] in: E. Hałas (ed.), *Rozumienie zmian społecznych* [Understanding of Social Changes], Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 2001, p. 9-21.

<sup>26</sup> T. Abel, *Systematic Sociology in Germany: A Critical Analysis of Some Attempts to Establish Sociology as an Independent Science*. New York: Octagon, 1929, p. 136.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

The more so one may wonder about Abel's later full trust in the methodology of "understanding" employed in his study of nazism.

The problem of taking into account the "point of view" of social life participants, or the definition of a situation and accompanying methodological problems were taken up also by another eminent student of Znaniecki at the University of Illinois, Urhona-Champaign—Alvin W. Gouldner.<sup>28</sup> He also focused his attention on the Weberian issue of the objectivity of understanding. Gouldner rightly pointed out, however, that objectivity of research is threatened when the agent's and researcher's points of view overlap completely.<sup>29</sup> To the contrary, Gouldner claimed that the task of a sociologist is to present human situations from a perspective that is not accessible to the agent.<sup>30</sup>

Gouldner distinguished three concepts of sociological objectivity: personal authenticity, normative objectivization and interpersonal replicability.<sup>31</sup> He pointed out that objectivity understood as lack of sociologist's involvement can become a form of alienation from society, a way of reconciliation with a world that is not accepted but also not fought against, even when it is experienced as something that causes pain.<sup>32</sup> I will try to show that something similar fell to Abel as researcher.

Gouldner pointed out the need for sociological objectivization of normative character, comparing the function of a sociologist to one of a judge who is to adjudicate in terms of certain moral values. In his opinion, objectivity understood that way is threatened by cultivation of exclusively technical standards of research.

When I raise ethical issues involved in sociological research I do not mean to place the normative paradigm in sociology in opposition to the interpretative one, or to conclude the dispute over the priority of rules or interactions. However, truly interpretative research can neither originate from the imperative of how it should be, nor be grounded in a closed system of norms. Such systems have their group carriers and it would mean the identification of a sociologist with a particular perspective of a group. It becomes increasingly clear that the articulation of non-systemic values is necessary, such that would not need ideological or doctrinal legitimacy always leading to conflicts connected with people's different outlooks on life. The possibility of using such a provisional, working normative criterion in social researches appears as a serious problem.

Employing, what Znaniecki called the principle of the "humanistic coefficient," which was to become the foundation of interpretive, culturalistic research, we will go

<sup>28</sup> A. W. Gouldner, "The Sociologist as Partisan: Sociology and the Welfare State," in: Larry T. Reynolds, Janie M. Reynolds, *The Sociology of Sociology: Analysis and Criticism of the Thought, Research and Ethical Folkways of Sociology and Its Practitioners*. New York: David McKay Company, Inc. 1970, p. 218-255.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 245.

<sup>30</sup> That problem of taking into account in social research two perspectives—one of the agent and the other of the observer—was also discussed as emic and ethic approaches. J. W. Lett, "Emic/Ethic Distinctions," in: David Levinson, Melvin Ember (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 2, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1996, p. 382-383.

<sup>31</sup> A. W. Gouldner, "Co się zdarzyło w socjologii: historyczny model rozwoju strukturalnego" [What Happened in Sociology: Historic Model of Structural Development] in: Jerzy Szacki (ed.), *Czy kryzys socjologii?* [Is there a Crisis in Sociology?]. Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1977, p. 127-255.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 158.



astray if that what is being researched is not contained in the system of interactions, but is treated subjectively. The "humanistic coefficient" is not so much a postulate to grasp "somebody else's" experience, but the experience of people interacting with one another. "The other way of obtaining an inductive knowledge of human activity would be to use consistently the humanistic coefficient in dealing with it and take it as it appears to the agent himself and to those who cooperate with him or counteract him (emph. E. H.)."<sup>33</sup> Looking after the sources of methodological complications in Abel's study of nazism one must notice that while referring to Weber, he was searching most of all for "*subjektive Sinn*" and was departing from Znaniecki's advice to take into account different perspectives of interacting agents.

The time has come to ask an urgent question how the humanistic perspective of understanding sociology relates to, what I propose to call, the human coefficient (emph. E. H.) of wrongful social actions and organized social crime, like nazism and communism. Stephen P. Turner is right when he says that fascism, as an object of research, was a test for a project of sociology as a social science.<sup>34</sup> One may add that it was a particular test to the understanding, humanistic or interpretative sociology. The case of Abel's study on nazism shows this ostensibly.

Anticipating briefly further analysis, it is necessary to say that Abel strove to deal with the above-mentioned ethical dilemmas during and after the war. He realized the necessity for *Verstehen* as hermeneutical understanding referring to emerged or generalized values and norms that he suggested to be called "cultural insights."<sup>35</sup> At the same time he referred to Hans-Georg Gadamer's "preconceptions," or prejudices.<sup>36</sup> Understanding turned out to be related to time, to the experience of temporality of social phenomena, and requiring historical distance that makes the competences of the sociologist making research "here and now" face limits of cognitive objectivity.<sup>37</sup> It is well exemplified by the case of Abel's research.

### Nazism in Changing Perspectives

The sense and implications of understanding in sociology still require greater clarity in order to better understand the understanding. Abel's diary sheds light on the methodological problems of his understanding research of nazism. The pages of his diary became a notebook of a field researcher when in 1934 he collected autobiographical material from NSDAP members. The study based on that material entitled *Why Hitler*

<sup>33</sup> F. Znaniecki, *The Method of Sociology*. New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc. 1934, p. 45.

<sup>34</sup> S. P. Turner, "Sociology and Fascism in the Interwar Period. The Myth and its Frame," in: Stephen P. Turner and Dirk Köster (eds.), *Sociology Responds to Fascism*, London, New York 1992, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> T. Abel, "Verstehen I and Verstehen II," *Theory and Decision. An International Journal for Philosophy and Methodology of the Social Sciences*, 1975, No 6, p. 101.

<sup>36</sup> A. Bronk, *Rozumienie, dzieje języka. Filozoficzna hermeneutyka H. G. Gadamera* [Understanding, History, Language, Philosophical Hermeneutics of H. G. Gadamer], Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 1982, p. 260.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278, 284, 287.

*Came into Power* (1938) was described as "a genuine sociological interpretation"<sup>38</sup> of nazism. The review written by Clifford Kirkpatrick and published just before the outbreak of the war in June of 1939<sup>39</sup> pointed to its numerous strong points. First, Kirkpatrick recognized Abel's objectivity as a remarkable achievement. He wrote: "...The author will doubtless be attacked in these hysterical times for his impartiality. [...] Finally, the book if it has the wide reading which it deserves, will tend to humanize the individual Nazi, who for most Americans is a stereotype de-humanized by propaganda"<sup>40</sup> (emph. E. H.).

In the perspective of time the moral drama of the sociologist becomes more visible. It consists in facing the dilemma between the need for impartiality and fears that such attitude may suggest acceptance of the very attitudes he describes. That case of application of autobiographical method discloses the trap created by adopting the perspective of a social life participant, or what phenomenologists call the natural attitude. The acceptance of the subjective attitude of NSDAP members, their "in order to" and "because of" motives, as advised by Weber's, *verstehende* methodology had to lead Abel to research results "normalizing" the Nazi movement. It does not mean that Abel did not present the phenomenon of nazism from a collective behaviour perspective. On the contrary, but unfortunately, he compulsively searched there for "normal forms" of a social movement—the object of his study. His interpretation of nazism assumes typicality of that social movement processes. Abel distinguishes the components common to all other social movements. He employs the explanation scheme similar to that of Neil Smelser's value-added pattern i.e., presents the development of a movement achieving success thanks to the combined effects of the following factors: social discontent; ideology; tactics; charismatic leadership.

In a way similar to Hans Gerth's<sup>41</sup> Abel analyzed the Nazi Party as a combination of two types of leadership: charismatic and bureaucratic. Terror as a type of action and totalitarianism as a feature of the Nazi system was not fully articulated at that early stage of sociological research. However, they were pointed to as pivotal features of nazism by Franz Neumann, who in 1942 published a book, whose title contained a reference to Jewish eschatology: a metaphor of Behemoth, a monster of chaos.<sup>42</sup> As early as 1944 there were lecture series on National Socialism, for example at Columbia University where Abel worked, given by Friedrich Pollock, Herbert Marcuse, Leo Lowenthal.<sup>43</sup> Those scientists, freed from any illusion about nazism some time ago, nevertheless "[...] saw the Bolshevik revolution as an act of liberation for

<sup>38</sup> R. G. Banister, "Principle, Politics, Profession. American Sociologists and Fascism 1930–1950," in: Stephen P. Turner and Dirk Köster (eds.), *Sociology Responds to Fascism*, London, New York 1992, p. 194.

<sup>39</sup> C. Kirkpatrick, Review: T. Abel, "Why Hitler Came Into Power," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 4, nr 3, June 1939, s. 410–411.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 411.

<sup>41</sup> H. Gerth, "The Nazi Party: Its Leadership and Composition," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. XLV, Jan. 1940, No 4, p. 517–541.

<sup>42</sup> F. Neumann, *Behemoth. The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1944*. New York: Octagon Books, 1963 (first published by Oxford University Press, New York 1942).

<sup>43</sup> L. Lowenthal, *An Unmastered Past. The Autobiographical Reflections of Leon Lowenthal*, Martin Jay (ed.), Berkeley: University of California Press 1987, p. 134.

humanity."<sup>44</sup> Therefore it seems that the premises of the critical Frankfurt School that they adopted did not contain in themselves methodological safeguards against taking the stand on the wrong side. It was rather their identity and social situation as members of a discriminated Jewish group and not theoretical and methodological tools they had at hand that provided a critical perspective on nazism. It seems that before the proposal of Jürgen Habermas to use the model of undistorted communication as a normative criterion (truth, legitimacy and veracity),<sup>45</sup> there is nothing in a critical theory that could solve the ethical dilemmas of a sociologist in a substantial way. Similarly, conflict theories normalize different forms of violence within the framework of a given real politics *status quo*.

The effort of impartiality on Abel's part deserves the highest appreciation because sociologists often give in and capitulate before the allegedly inevitable partiality of a researcher. Howard Becker concluded that "[...] the question is not whether we should take sides, since we inevitably will, but rather whose side we are on."<sup>46</sup> The process of understanding the phenomenon of nazism, as exemplified by Abel's position, turns out to be—as mentioned above—a process changing in time and developing. It is contained within the following meaningful framework: the perspective of a theoretician-observer of a normal scene, taking up research; the perspective of a field researcher in everyday interactions with Nazis strengthening the normalization of the phenomenon; the perspective of an interpreter of biographical data strengthening the normalization of the phenomenon; the perspective of collective historical experience of war subversive to the normalisation.

Abel, as his diary proves, first became acquainted with the phenomenon of nazism through mass media. He therefore employed—in Schütz words—"third hand" typifications. It was a cognition from the distance ("they") of a problematic phenomenon criticized by the democratic public opinion in the United States. As a researcher Abel adopted next a position free from valuation. The principle of the "humanistic coefficient," employed unilaterally as acceptance of "somebody else's perspective," i.e., the actors' point of view, led to accepting "normal forms" of investigated phenomena. Here a question emerges: does "to understand" mean "to decipher" or to "give meaning?" Is understanding of a "receptive" or "active" character? The issue here is much more complicated because there is not only "reading" of meanings but also understanding in axiological sense: perception of good and evil.

### Participants' Perspective and the Normalisation of Nazism

The idea of writing a study of nazism based on autobiographical data started when Abel visited Germany in 1933, after Hitler came into power. Abel was prompted by people's ease of revealing their experience: "During a visit to Germany in the summer

of 1933, I was struck by the willingness of most people I encountered to discuss their political experiences."<sup>47</sup> In Abel's diary<sup>48</sup> we find a record of his interactions with Nazis in everyday situations in Germany, in summer of 1933 and 1934. As mentioned earlier, Abel's observation of nazism in everyday situations of ordinary Germans and followers of NSDAP led him to using interpretative categories that compelled him to understand the phenomenon as typical and normal. The first such normalizing context for nazism was the everyday life on "Bremen" that "flew the Nazi flag for the first time."<sup>49</sup> In his diary Abel recorded: "Have the people changed? They seem to be going along after their business as usual and their problems remain the same. The Germans whom I met and saw behave as they always did."<sup>50</sup> Out of interaction with followers of nazism come out personality types "surprisingly free of ferociousness"<sup>51</sup>, like the "husky fellow"<sup>52</sup> or the "polite" man.<sup>53</sup> In the diary we find a record of Abel's observations that confirms the hypothesis formulated here: Abel's understanding of nazism was definitively influenced by the experience of everyday life in Germany under Hitler, and the conviction that the institutionalization of the movement was taking place within the framework of state organization, routinizing and normalizing it.

"There is a group in Germany absolutely devoted to the leader and maintains the ardor of idealism. But what strikes me most is the fact that the average German has turned to the business of the day which is the same as it was any other day, only that it may be now more difficult to carry on. There is the acceptance of the state of affairs, an indifference to political issues, but interest in the pay roll and in the improvement of one's lot. One hears the greeting of *Heil Hitler* only in official places. There is the *Guten Morgen* and *Auf Wiedersehen* in everyday contacts.

The N. S. is fighting against the inevitable phenomena of ordinary life — impossibility of perpetual enthusiasm, selfishness, interest in the amenities of life which have no idealistic significance, domination by the circle of personal problems, neglect of community problems. The victory of every-day life is inevitable..."<sup>54</sup> (emph. E. H.).

Abel seems not to notice the influence of the strategy of Nazis on him; a strategy he however identified and recorded in his diary. "An editorial" in the "Völkische Beobachter" advises to go easy with critics and to try to convert them one by one through personal influence."<sup>55</sup> (emph. E. H.).

<sup>47</sup> T. Abel, *Why Hitler Came Into Power*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986 (first edition 1938), p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> Selections from the diary have been published: T. Abel, *The Columbia Circle of Scholars. Selections from the Journal 1930-1957*. Edited and introduced by Elżbieta Hataś, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 2001.

<sup>49</sup> T. Abel, *The Columbia Circle of Scholars. Selections from the Journal (1930-1957)*, Edited and introduced by Elżbieta Hataś, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 2001, p. 94.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181f.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>45</sup> J. Habermas, *Teoria działania komunikacyjnego*, t. I: *Racjonalność Działania a racjonalność społeczna*, [The Theory of Communicative Action. Reason and the Rationalization of Society], Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1987, p. 187.

<sup>46</sup> H. S. Becker, "Whose Side are We On?" *Social Problems*, vol. 14, No 3, 1967, p. 239-247.

Usually attention is drawn to the deforming influence of a researcher and research process on reality being investigated. The issue of prevalence of conceptual framework put on investigated reality, also in autobiographical research, was taken up.<sup>56</sup> Here, as in a clinical case, one can follow the influence of the investigated on the researcher, distorting the research process. Not only anonymous contacts and occasional interaction with NSDAP members are in question. Abel entered face-to-face interactions with the Nazis representing the movement, e.g., officials of the Propaganda Ministerium, close collaborators of Goebbels. In his diary there is not a single reflective remark concerning the possibility of losing distance and objectivity and giving in to purposeful manipulation of impressions. He assumed an open context of consciousness, i.e., commensurability of meanings communicated by the investigated and meanings read by the researcher.

"Went to see Dr. Schulze-Wechsungen—a close collaborator of Goebbels in the struggle for Berlin, high up in the party and head of the propaganda bureau. [...] Very engaging personality—highly intelligent—the son of very rich factory owners in Berlin. He received me well. Proposed that he will personally ask people to write life-histories for me. I had to talk a lot to convince him that only a prize contest can give the necessary material which can lead to generalizations acceptable in the U.S.A. He argued that a few typical write-ups will speak for all—but what is typical has yet to be found out. To him, who is intimately acquainted with conditions and sentiments, it is easy to judge the issue of typicality for he has the supporting evidence in his experience. To an outsider statements must be supported on the basis of mass-material."<sup>57</sup>

It is to be remembered that Abel's research, because of its moral ambiguity, was refused to be sponsored in U.S.A. Thus the extinction of ethical dilemmas in research process is even more intriguing. Undoubtedly, it was a result of the influence of the investigated on the researcher. Adopting the perspective of the majority of Germans, the perspective of everyday life was so complete that all facts incongruous with the "normalized" image of nazism had to be normalized and adjusted. The most striking example of that normalization is the description of the situation after the Hitler—Rohm conflict. Abel accepted the official propaganda version. "Convinced myself as to Hitler's sincerity, his deep faith in himself, his devotion to the cause of Germany, also the justification of his regime."<sup>58</sup> He conforms the controversial facts to the basic scheme of understanding ("master scheme") and "normalizes" them by means of such neutralization techniques as Hitler's "excuses."<sup>59</sup> "Purges" are justified by the need of eliminating abuses, Hitler's bad opinion is a result of irresponsible elements and cruel means are unavoidable during every revolution.

In the introduction to the book *Why Hitler Came Into Power* Abel expresses thanks to Dr. Schulze-Wechsungen for organizing the autobiographical contest. It was a peculiar form of Abel's interaction with Nazis. The idea assumed enough "normalcy"

<sup>56</sup> K. Plummer, *Documents of Life. An Introduction to the Problems and Literature of a Humanistic Method*, London 1983, p. 140f.

<sup>57</sup> T. Abel, *The Columbia Circle of Scholars. Selections from the Journal (1930–1957)*, Edited and Introduced by Elżbieta Hałas. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, p. 184f.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 195f.

<sup>59</sup> E. Hałas, *Spóeczny kontekst znaczeń w teorii symbolicznego interakcjonizmu* [The Social Context of Meanings in Theory of Symbolic Interactionism], Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 1987, p. 144.

of conditions in Germany and in NSDAP, making it possible to organize a "normal" contest and gathering credible material. "It occurred to me to start a prize contest for life histories of Nazis in Germany to collect some first hand material"<sup>60</sup>—wrote Abel in his journal. The contest organized under the auspices of NSDAP leadership was a normalizing and legitimizing factor for the movement. The idea of written autobiography itself reminds us of literary contests. It was the same idea that underlaid biographical contests organized by the scholars from the Chicago School and Znaniecki's biographical method. It consisted in promoting everyday life of ordinary people. The appeal for participation in the contest that Abel formulated could suggest positive valuation of NSDAP movement affiliation. It was formulated by the representative of American researchers aiming at collecting true information, seeking "the Best Personal Life History of an Adherent of the Hitler Movement."<sup>61</sup> It assumes "truth" about the movement itself that is identical with the knowledge that members of the movement have. The appeal was effective in provoking narration.

"(...) went to see Mr. Seyferth. He received me cordially. I presented my case briefly. He read my announcement for the prize-contest and immediately started to tell me his own life, the bitter struggle in the party, the physical tortures which he suffered from the reds, how his parents have disowned him, how he lost position after position as soon as his employers discovered he was a N.S. He spoke forcefully and with feeling, with a strange glow in his eyes. He said he very seldom talks of his experience in the fight for N.S. but that my splendid appeal provoked him to his remarks."<sup>62</sup>

As shown earlier, beginning the research Abel kept his distance, adopted a critical attitude and evaluated NSDAP negatively. In his diary he records important dates in the historical calendar and changes taking place on the European political scene. As I stated above, initially he adopted the tone of American commentators critical of Hitler's takeover, indicating that the power was taken by reactionary forces that would lead to a war.<sup>63</sup> "But the use of brute force, ruthless actions, glorification of war, etc. are characteristic of the Nazi movement. (...) The ordinary Nazi feels he was betrayed by humanism and thinks that only force counts and that force can achieve anything. His idea of reconstruction is domination."<sup>64</sup> However, at that time, a more general interpretative category, including totalitarianism, is missing. Whereas reading *Mein Kampf* Abel says univocally. "The book supports regression to barbarianism, glorification of violence, of ethno-centrism, of the right of exploitation of the weaker by the stronger, opposition to institutions of higher civilization."<sup>65</sup> The change of the way of understanding follows the change of perspective—from distant spectator to the participant in contacts and interactions with Hitler's followers.

Reading of Abel's personal diary gives us access to his attempts to understand nazism being, during his visits to Germany, a part of his everyday experience. By

<sup>60</sup> T. Abel, *The Columbia Circle of Scholars. Selections from the Journal (1930–1957)*, Edited and Introduced by Elżbieta Hałas. Frankfurt am Main 2001, Peter Lang Verlag, p. 165.

<sup>61</sup> T. Abel, *Why Hitler Came Into Power*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (1 wyd. 1938), 1986, p. 3.

<sup>62</sup> T. Abel, *The Columbia Circle of Scholars. Selections from the Journal (1930–1957)*, Edited and Introduced by Elżbieta Hałas. Frankfurt am Main 2001, Peter Lang Verlag, p. 180.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 95.



necessity they are fragmentary, chaotic, interrupted by the change of narration's subject, and they reflect the change of practical attention. Charles W. Mills postulated that kind of a personal diary to be the foundation of shaping sociological imagination. Also Znaniecki<sup>66</sup> spoke of sociologist's personal experience as a source of knowledge. Provisional understanding of nazism, in the context of ordinary subjective comprehension, becomes an attempt of interpretation when Abel introduces the language of sociological theory. He no longer comprehends nazism as a psychological, or political-ideological phenomenon, but as strictly social phenomenon, an example of collective behavior. Nazism is a social movement, and therefore it is one of the forms of social phenomena. To say so, is to give it intelligibility as opposed to the statement that expressed unintelligibility when he spoke of collective barbarism. "Thought of writing an article for «Social Forces» on the sociological aspects of the Nazi movement emphasizing the following points: 1. Regression to Middle Ages in ideology 2. Attempt to restore "we"-feeling 3. Causal explanation of the movement 4. Conformity to a general scheme typical of all movements"<sup>67</sup> (emph. E. H.). Since the very beginning, Abel aimed at the a sociological study of the origin of the Nazi movement that (...) might reveal important general theorems on the origin, development and nature of social movements."<sup>68</sup>

Especially the assumption of conformity with a general, universal scheme of a social movement needs to be analyzed because it introduces the assumption of practical rationality of that social phenomenon. That understanding is based on deduction. Nazism conforms to the assumption that there are general statements concerning movements. Such an understanding characterizes what Aaron Cicourel called a documentary process—nazism as a "document" of a more general phenomenon. Thus, in a similar way Abel categorizes ideology and organization of Nazi movement as typical.

"The outstanding characteristic of the ideology of the movement is its emphasis of the claim that it represents the truly German thought, the best traditions of Germany, that is aims at the revival of Germany's greatness, it restores the values of patriotism, prestige of the former empire, and propounds the idea of unity of all Germans. This emphasis because of its emotional content and its broad form has won the support of many people, particularly the middle class."<sup>69</sup>

The essence of Nazi movement idea and German patriotism would be—according to Abel—the same. Thus, the ideology was becoming comprehensible. Aggressiveness and intolerance were becoming simply a question of intensity. "There is a difference only in fact that the Nazi pursue drastically their idea of unification whereas the others were more tolerant and less aggressive, more cultured and critical in their approach."<sup>70</sup> Racist ideas, in order for understanding to be cohesive, are—according to categorizing and normalizing definition—eugenic ideas lacking criticism.<sup>71</sup> Abel

<sup>66</sup> F. Znaniecki, *The Method of Sociology*. New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1934, p. 7f.

<sup>67</sup> T. Abel, *The Columbia Circle of Scholars. Selections from the Journal (1930–1957)*, Edited and Introduced by Elżbieta Hałas. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 2001, p. 136.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

also tried to understand the ideology of Nazi movement using the concept of regress to the Middle Ages. It is only a quasi-explanation giving intellect support by reducing the unknown to the quasi-known.

By making such categorizations, Abel retains a relativistic attitude of the Weberian value-free researcher. A question emerges, why the use of those abstract categories did not allow—through interpretation and understanding of nazism—distance and criticism, but rather "assimilation"<sup>72</sup> by the researcher of the common-sense categories of the movement participants. In the light of the presented analysis one of the answers comes: presenting nazism as a case of more general classes of social phenomena eluded the doubtfulness and led to presentation of the phenomenon as normal; to the statement "nothing unusual is happening"<sup>73</sup> because it is consistent with certain standards expressed in typifications. In common-sense understanding typifications guarantee the "normalcy" of the situation.

In the book *Why Hitler Came Into Power* Abel writes: "I therefore declare myself willing to bear the accusation of impartiality, but plead «not guilty» to a charge of intended approval or disapproval of the movement."<sup>74</sup> He states that he presents facts and opinions without comment and that does not mean he agrees with them. He claims that he presents them as evidence relevant for understanding the movement, regardless whether they are "true" or "false." Again the question emerges: what are the limits of sociology free from valuation? For to understand is not only to grasp meaning, but also axiological significance.

#### Pre-understanding and Ethical Horizon of the Researcher

A task emerges of finding for sociology axiological reference systems that neither have their own particular carriers—specific social groups, nor are they assumed as universal. Not even systems that many groups would regard as universal. Such systems of axiological reference could be called cosmopolitan, with members of the cosmopolitan community of social scientist—refraining from identifying with particular groups—acting as their carriers. There was something of that idea in the concept of Karl Mannheim who, however, wrongly ascribed impartiality and functions of an axiological arbiter to the intelligentsia as a social stratum. My argument is that the function of a "judge," which Gouldner wrote about, can be satisfactorily fulfilled by a social researcher when he frees himself, that is—separates from a specific social location. It seems that a sociologist should remain impartial and in that sense free from values of particular groups—big or small, minorities or majorities—and at the same time free from ethical systems that have their collective group carriers. It does not mean freedom from any valuation and relativism so common in societies in which

<sup>72</sup> P. Ricoeur, *Język, tekst, interpretacja* [Language, Text, Interpretation]. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1989, p. 272.

<sup>73</sup> J. Emerson, *Nothing Unusual Is Happening*, in: Jerome Mannis, Bernard Meltzer (eds.), *Symbolic Interaction. A Reader in Social Psychology*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1978, p. 272–280.

<sup>74</sup> T. Abel, *Why Hitler Came Into Power*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (first edition: 1938) 1986, p. 9.



the value of anything is determined more and more by the market. Let us then ask a question: what could be the origin of a sociologist's axiological reference system? Znaniecki maintained that a reference point could be found in philosophy of values formulating the idea of the highest values that—like peace—have positive meaning for the whole of humanity.<sup>75</sup> Far from questioning the usefulness of philosophical reflection on values, doubts may be raised whether consensus is possible on this level. There is nothing in philosophy itself and its methods that would make that kind of knowledge privileged in matters of axiology. The meeting of philosophers with nazism (Martin Heidegger, et al.) gives us a merciless lesson. It seems that a sociologist should rid her/himself of the ambition of saving the world. The notion of humanity and its value is still too general to constitute an axiological reference system. It belongs to a wider system of ideas of Western civilization and human rights ideology and is also a subject of conflicts over meaning in the era of globalization. Axiology of sociologists, in order to fulfill its function should be "a-social" (in a sense of separation from the position of particular groups: political, national, religious and other) and "a-ethical" (in a sense of separation from all principles presented as "closed" systems). Richard Rorty suggested the ethics of solidarity, i.e., ethics of compassion. It is however more of a moral attitude that assumes primary moral intuition and conscience that should constitute the qualifications of any person, not only of the researcher.

Instead, of concern here are certain principles that could serve as less subjective instruments to be used in research. Sociology may be a-social and a-ethical but cannot be a-moral. It cannot legitimize cruelty and violence. A specific interpretation of the Hippocratic oath can be helpful here. One has to assume that the state of "social health" does not exist and the diagnostic function about which Abel wrote<sup>76</sup> cannot be separated from the analytical and synthetic functions of sociology. It is during the diagnosis stage that harmfulness or harmlessness of medical intervention is determined. This analogy has of course its limitations because a sociologist does not intervene in social reality. He is not a social politician. He is however its diagnostician. The principle *primum non nocere* can be expounded here in reference to social life as not giving labels of normalcy and typically to instances of cruelty, violence, domination and inequality common in social life.

As I am trying to prove here, the source of danger and ethical dilemmas of that discipline lies in the tradition of understanding sociology and Weber's method of ideal types connected with the principle of freedom from valuation. Also in that very tradition there are beginnings for development of its rightful cause and vocation. Provided, just like in Znaniecki's concept of *humanistic coefficient*, not only meanings but also valuations and social sentiments given in people's experience are taken into account.<sup>77</sup> Full understanding cannot imply complete tolerance if meanings and values of individuals and groups are coupled with hate and other hostile feelings. Social

<sup>75</sup> F. Znaniecki, "Should Sociologists Be Also Philosophers of Value?" *Sociology and Social Research*, 1952, vol. 37, No 2, p. 79–84.

<sup>76</sup> T. Abel, *Podstawy teorii socjologicznej* [Foundations of Sociological Theory]. Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1977, p. 25.

<sup>77</sup> E. Hałas, *Symbol w interakcji* [Symbols in Interaction]. Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2001, p. 77–109.

feelings—hate and love (altruism)—constitute a sociologist's axiological system of negative and positive reference. It has a beyond-system character and does not rely only on some kind of intuition. It can be even said that it is pragmatic in character. In order to stay moral, sociology cannot be exclusively instrumentally rational. It has to relate to social feelings and, as Sorokin suggested, make altruism the criterion of its valuation. The example of Abel's research shows that impartiality is only one aspect characteristic of a sociologist's craft. Without it he would be threatened by losing himself in partial ideology or interests. That impartiality should not be confused with tolerance. Abel was still convinced that "Ultimately the practical difficulty of a detached analysis may be overcome by practicing complete tolerance and full understanding, according to the maxim of Madame de Staël: *Tout comprendre et tout pardonner*."<sup>78</sup> The history of nazism research conducted on the basis of such an assumption can be a moral tale for the generation of sociologists after nazism and communism in the epoch of new global conflicts.

<sup>78</sup> T. Abel, *Systematic Sociology in Germany: A Critical Analysis of Some Attempts to Establish Sociology as an Independent Science*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1929, p. 113.