

# Acknowledgments: An Academic Ritual

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Ever since my graduate student days, I have been mystified by and fascinated with the acknowledgments found in scholarly volumes, and especially those in the social sciences that I am most familiar with. I have read hundreds if not thousands of them in the course of my professional life. As is often the case with various social or cultural phenomena, their significance emerges when they are aggregated. That is to say, while acknowledgments read in isolation from one another may not strike the reader as noteworthy or puzzling, when a large number of them are read in succession, questions begin to arise.<sup>1</sup> The reader of these tributes need not be a hardened cynic to hesitate taking them at face value.

I sensed that in this unlikely source I stumbled upon yet another manifestation of the proverbial divergence between appearance and reality—always of interest for social scientists, intellectuals, and commentators on modern life, academic and otherwise. While engaging in a bit of “demystification” in the pages that follow, I also wish to register some reservations about the present day obsession with concealment—central to influential currents of our intellectual-cultural life and “postmodernism” in particular. Eugene Goodheart’s comment explains my reservations about demystification: “Why as a matter of principle, should we trust the hidden rather than the evident sense of an intellectual or cultural product? . . . The habit of ideological suspicion *when it becomes systematic and totalizing* tends to produce insensitivity to ‘higher’ values, an inclination to associate truth with a cynical view or motive.”<sup>2</sup>

Although the number of individuals whose contributions are acknowledged may vary from a handful to scores,<sup>3</sup> the style and substance of these statements of gratitude are remarkably uniform. They all conjure up a world of unsullied devotion to ideas, unsurpassed collegiality, the warmth of intellectual bonding, the glow of supportive family ties, human generosity and kindness at their best, and redeeming authorial modesty—a world of cooperation, goodwill, and selflessness. Authors invariably benefit from the “unstinting” devotion of colleagues and “the unfailing generosity” of spouses, friends, students, and

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assorted academic officials. The intellectual debts joyously incurred are usually “vast,” teachers and advisers make their “wisdom available at every step.” With astonishing frequency authors profess to be “unusually fortunate” to have encountered such individuals (who nevertheless seem to abound in academic life, if these tributes are to be believed). Many of these writers confess of their difficulties to find the proper words for expressing their boundless gratitude.

If accepted at face value, acknowledgments of this type would compel us thoroughly to revise not merely our conceptions of the nature of scholarly research and writing, of collegiality, of the relationship between authors and editors, and of the typical marital relations of academics, but also of human nature itself. Hence the point of departure of these reflections is the sheer implausibility of the phenomenon: from everything we know about human nature, American academic life, the norms of collegiality, and the family life of productive academics—the images of human relationships in and outside academia that emerge from acknowledgments invite scepticism.

Acknowledgments are permeated by hyperbole, effusiveness, overstatement, and exaggeration. Nothing short of “extraordinary,” “brilliant,” “invaluable,” “admirable,” “profound,” “immeasurable” (usually debt owed), “wonderful,” “superb,” “uncommon” (usually affixed to “dedication”), and “unwavering” (mostly “support”) is good enough to convey gratitude. (“Irreverent” too is frequently encountered as high praise.) Vast numbers of “extraordinarily wise” teachers leave their imprint on these books; “immense” amounts are learned from colleagues; criticism is always “judicious” and “penetrating,” cheerfully accepted, and put to good use. Never do we come upon an author who does not wholeheartedly embrace criticism.

Sometimes the authors in question seek to scale the heights of poetic expression, playfulness, and lyrical style. One author began his acknowledgments as follows:

My friends will recognize this book for what it is: stone soup. Like the down-and-out swindlers of the fable, I boiled up a pot of water, tossed in some pebbles, then invited passersby to add whatever soup makings they could spare. They added plenty. What’s more, they performed a miracle: the stones became edible.<sup>4</sup>

Even publishers (according, for example, to a famous economist) are “uncommonly” patient and kind. He writes: “I have never quite understood why publishers . . . do not get tired of authors. Probably they do, but those with whom I have been so happily associated conceal it with a rare and kindly skill.” In another instance a senior editor of a major publishing house provided “at each major junction . . . encouragement and sound advice, exhibiting admirable patience and just the right amount of editorial prodding.” The vice president of yet another publisher “deserves special praise: from prospectus to publication, his unflagging good faith and professional expertise literally kept

the project alive. Advising but never constraining, she turned editorial permissiveness into a virtue."

Supporting staff are thanked by a social historian for "persistence, accuracy and cheerfulness through it all"; an editor for "patience, perseverance and encouragement . . . indispensable for the whole enterprise." A well-known historian was "blessed by the assistance of a large number of . . . graduate students" who were among "an embarrassingly large group of individuals" to whom he is indebted for their help.

The lavish tributes paid to those who allegedly helped the authors are in sharp contrast with the modest role authors appear to assign to themselves in the creation of their work. Their self-conceptions are disarmingly humble, self-effacing, even self-deprecating, sometimes bordering on confessions of incompetence.

It is the central, if sometimes implicit, proposition of many acknowledgments that the author would have been incapable of writing and improving the book in question without the "immense" and "invaluable" help of a large cohort of dedicated individuals who either read the manuscript, discussed its topic, offered boundless encouragement, or created favorable conditions for research and reflection, thereby promoting creativity; spouses in particular make the author's life tranquil, comfortable, and fulfilled.

More matter of factly, authors thank institutions (colleges, foundations, libraries) for leaves of absence, research grants, office space, access to archives and other source materials. Often there is further reference to the large number of additional people to whom the author is also indebted but who must remain anonymous because of the sheer numbers involved.

The praise lavished on particular individuals tends to be elaborate and fulsome. For example, "I have had the rare good fortune throughout the writing of this book to review its contents with [X]. . . . I cannot easily measure the debt I owe to [X] . . . , but I would like to pay tribute to his extraordinary understanding of human behavior and thank him for many generousities," a social psychologist writes. A political scientist thanks his colleagues "for invaluable advice and criticism" and particular individuals among them "for unflinching optimism," "for wit," "for poetry," "for needed finickiness," and "for high design." He thanks his wife "for not telling who really wrote the book." There is much rejoicing, as one writer put it, over "have[ing] acquired a wonderful string of intellectual debts."

Editors of a volume of social criticism reveal that "the personal and intellectual debts incurred in the incubation of this collection of essays are immense." There is reference to the "invaluable aid and advice," "enthusiasm," "perceptive insight," "encouragement and bolstering our spirit" of particular individuals. Most noteworthy, "our best critics remain our closest friends"!

Authors almost compulsively credit luck or good fortune for being able to benefit from the advice, guidance, wisdom, skill, patience, knowledge, insight, and so on of their benefactors. It would seem that luck (in finding these extraordinary people) mattered more than their own skill, perseverance, knowledge, or aptitude; evidently they would have been helpless on their own, as in the case of a writer whose mentor's "rigorous and demanding guidance . . . never ceased to make up for my random and uneven academic inclinations." A sociologist thanked one of the readers of his manuscript for "contribut[ing] immeasurably to whatever cogency these pages possess" after noting "the number of intellectual and personal debts that I shall doubtless be unable to repay in full." A famous sociologist expresses gratitude to an educator "for having taken a brash sophomore in hand to make him see the intellectual excitement of studying . . . systems of social relations." He pays tribute to another benefactor for "helping . . . escape from [his] provincialism of thinking." Another paternal figure "has no conception of the full extent of my intellectual debt to him" and is likewise thanked profusely. Some authors go still further in diminishing, with seeming relish, their own role in producing their book by claiming that "all scholarship in this field (as probably in most others) is of necessity a collective enterprise."

A favorite theme of the acknowledgments is the domestic disruptions associated with the creative process and the agonies of single-minded absorption in the project shouldered by all those around the author, especially spouses and children. References to "surviving" the ordeal associated with the writing of a book are common. (The unstated message seems to be that a book must have some merit if it required such colossal efforts and prolonged disruptions.) A well-known sociologist writes "My deepest gratitude, as always, is to my wife and children, who, despite busy lives of their own, find the serenity to put up with me." The apologetic attitude also finds expression in a reference to the "many students and colleagues [who] suffered through my attempts to formulate ideas about culture in seminars, colloquia, and informal discussions."

Acknowledgments suggest that producing a scholarly volume is an enormously difficult, demanding, anxiety-producing, even depriving undertaking that can only succeed if the author is surrounded by a vast number of dedicated individuals and helpers anxious to meet all his or her intellectual, emotional, or practical needs.

It is hard to find an acknowledgment that does not make clear that the author is married and very happily so. In the rare instance when there is no spousal reference, parents or siblings are thanked—sometimes grown children, as for instance those of a social psychologist who "both cheered and challenged" him by "their intellectual presence and love."

Informing the reading public about marital bliss appears to be obligatory on the part of most authors. These marital images may remind the reader of politicians running for office who regularly allude to their exemplary family

life and whose wives hover in the back- or fore-ground and testify by their very presence to the rectitude and normalcy of the campaigner. Perhaps both politicians and writers of social science books sense that substantive accomplishments relevant to the office sought—or the scholarly contribution pursued—are by themselves insufficient to garner goodwill, popularity, and favorable reception.

Spouses occupy a central position in these tributes. A well-known political scientist confessed to “owe[ing her] a debt that mere words cannot express. This book in every sense is a joint enterprise.” An anthropologist reported having been “helped much by my wife whose unfettered originality is a constant inspiration.” The author of a popular textbook in sociology owed

the greatest debt of all to my wife . . . Her criticisms and suggestions have influenced the manuscript at every stage of its development . . . Because of the magnitude of her contribution . . . I wanted her to agree to coauthorship, but she too modestly refused. I have reluctantly accepted her decision.

Another sociologist (no longer married) described his spouse as his “closest friend and companion . . . involved in the writing of this book from the beginning. Possessing the wisdom to celebrate life in spite of its tribulations, she has taught me the difference between analytic pessimism and personal pessimism, which . . . immobilizes the spirit.”

A social historian refers to his wife as

a constant source of encouragement. Still my best friend and often best critic, she is the intellectual other of this book, my principal source of dialogue about its large structure and small textures.

A psychologist owes his “greatest debt” to his wife “whose sensitivity, intelligence and wise counsel have improved every page of this book.” A well-known sociologist writes:

My wife . . . listened and criticized patiently throughout . . . her readiness to master the history [of the chosen topic] . . . went, in my opinion beyond the call . . . she dissected with me each sentence and phrase of the manuscript. . . . This was immensely helpful since my editorial imagination had long since been dulled. . . . [O]ur first son . . . obliged by making his appearance just five days before an earlier version of this book was submitted . . . as a Ph.D. dissertation. His birth added an air of creativity to the event.

There is the wife who “listened to the 8th and 9th drafts of a troublesome passage with the same humor and intelligence as she did the first.” A well-published sociologist informed the readers that his wife “not only bore with me through the seemingly interminable preparation of this study, not only surveyed its progress with her exceptional combination of perseverance, deftness and high intelligence, but also did a very important part of verifying,

counting, tallying and editing.” Another dedicated wife “read several drafts of the manuscript even as she worked and watched after our daughters.” One wife is thanked “for her unfailing belief—expressed in endless ways—that what I was doing was significant,” another for being “an all important sustaining force over the years.”

It remains a mystery why these intellectually stimulating and creatively contributing spouses did not become designated as coauthors.

The following lengthy quote captures virtually all essential attributes of acknowledgments here discussed:

If any of the arguments and analyses that follow turn out to hold any water this is no doubt to a large extent attributable to the innumerable fellow students, friends, colleagues, and students of my own who were willing to listen to my half-baked ramblings and helped me turn them into something more or less coherent. A complete list would be impossible, but at the very least would include [20 names follow]. For specific comments and criticism . . . without which the book would have been much worse I am indebted to [nine names follow]. I am particularly grateful to [two names], without whose strong support and encouragement at crucial junctures this book might never have gone to press. But the greatest debt of gratitude by far I owe to [X], who saw the project through from start to finish, and whose characteristic blend of relentless criticism and unfailing support makes him a superb teacher, colleague and friend. . . . For helping me with the often extraordinarily demanding word-processing, typing, indexing and library work, I thank [five names follow]. I also owe a great deal to [Y] for the truly magnificent job of copy editing she did on the unwieldy manuscript. Finally, a debt of a different kind, but probably the greatest of all, I owe to my wife . . . without whose support of love through years of obsessive work, illness, uprooting moves and frustrations of all kinds, I would never have made it to this point.

Did the author truly believe that his ideas were “half-baked”? That without the vast amount of help he received the book would have been incoherent and indigestible?

In the same acknowledgment there are some counterpoints to the self-deprecating themes, allusions to the substance, complexity, and burden of the undertaking that required “obsessive” work, and resulted in an “unwieldy” manuscript (the creative energies were hard to contain). Even such mundane tasks as typing, indexing, and library work were “extraordinarily demanding.” But thanks to the concentrated efforts of all those wonderful human beings—at once supportive and ready to offer “relentless criticism”—the author overcame all obstacles (it is being suggested that there were many).

The widely read author of a study of (certain aspects of) popular culture was even more dependent on the help of generous individuals:

This book could not have been written without the help of about 200 men and women . . . who allowed themselves to be questioned by me, giving freely of their

time and knowledge. They were unfailingly courteous. . . . It is impossible to thank each of them individually. . . .

In addition a few individuals so far went beyond the call of friendship or duty in permitting me to sharpen my ideas through extended discussion with them that I must single them out for public thanks. The first is my wife . . . who was and is far more than a patient spouse . . . . Her perceptive and forthright comments provided a running critique that compelled me . . . to clarify and condense.

A well-known social psychologist credits "such readability as [his book] has" to his editor's "sensitivity to style. She also performed with patience and care numerous of those other chores that go into the making of a book. I am grateful for her serenity and loyalty as well as her competence."

A general impression the diligent reader of acknowledgments carries away with him is the profusion of brilliant, generous, and inspiring human beings who inhabit academia in various capacities and are ready to be at the disposal of their intellectually challenged colleagues. They include "numerous colleagues who provided just the right mixture of involved criticism and independence-fostering detachment." There is praise "for the determination [they] manifested [and] displayed in the face of endless distractions and obstacles, and the intelligence and perceptiveness they brought to bear on every situation, [without which] the project could not have hoped to succeed even remotely as well as it did."

Almost invariably the brilliance of great figures contrasts with the implicit limitations of the humble author:

As regards this book, my most immediate debt, both intellectual and personal is to [X] who taught me, by his own example, the meaning of the phrase "an infinite capacity for taking pains." His help and advice extended far beyond editorial criticism and prodded me to rethink, revise and rethink again. . . . I drew freely on his knowledge and suggestions . . . and always marveled at his generosity of spirit. . . .

To [Y], I owe more than I can express. The impact of his lectures, altogether magical in my memory, grows rather than diminishes with each passing year . . . .

To [Z], a brilliant and provocative presence in the classroom, I owe whatever sensitivity and appreciation I have for the science of social science. [More thanks to more people follow.]

The author of a popular introductory text in sociology writes:

In the preparation of this book I benefited tremendously from the help of a number of people . . . scholars in several fields were kind enough to read part or all of the original manuscript. My only complaint is that they had so many valuable suggestions that the preparation of the book took much longer than I had planned. . . . I also owe a special debt to [the sociology editor of the publisher]. His skillful assistance and constant support have been invaluable, and his good humor and enthusiasm made our collaboration a pleasure.

A skillful typist is also a tremendous asset and it was my good fortune to have an excellent one.

The acknowledgments further suggest that not only were the authors fortunate to have brilliant, knowledgeable, and authoritative people at their disposal at every step of their undertaking, but that these people, in addition to their scholarly qualifications and excellence, were also impressive human beings—patient, kind, sensitive, good humored, and good natured.

The observations made so far were based on acknowledgments written by men. To find out if female authors approach the task differently I sampled a comparable number of social scientific (largely sociological) books by female scholars published mostly during the 1980s and 1990s. My findings follow.

The author of a study published in the early 1990s displays all the attributes noted earlier. She writes:

I have been blessed with so much support and accumulated so many debts along the way that it is hard to know where to begin . . . my words are destined to fall short. . . .

I was fortunate to spend a year in academic paradise as a visiting scholar at. . . . Surrounded by a uniquely inspiring and stimulating group of colleagues and provided with an exceptionally dedicated support staff. . . .

It has been an honor to work with a group of gifted and dedicated editors [who] supported me with enthusiasm, creativity and intelligence. . . . Whatever grace and good sense can be found in these pages is in large measure due to [their] keen insight and . . . deft editorial touch. . . .

Special friends and relatives sustained me and kept me sane through this long project. . . . Immeasurable thanks go to all of these people for making my life not only full, but fun.

It is impossible to find the right words to thank my husband . . . and my daughter.

From another volume we learn that “No author is ever alone in writing a text and my indebtedness goes beyond the footnotes and bibliography. It is with great pleasure that I begin by thanking my loving husband . . . for his enthusiastic support and unwavering encouragement over the years I spent writing this book. . . . His words of encouragement sustained me through the difficult periods.”

The author of a study on childcare could not have written her book without her “committed teachers . . . who nurtured [her] passion for scholarship.” Her teachers “went beyond the bounds of generosity in mentoring [her] on this project.” Like so many others, she also had “a superb research assistant.” Every member of her family “has been a source of sustenance and support.” She had “many wonderful conversations with [her] lifelong friend . . . ,” who “provided emergency lodging and emotional support during a crucial stage” and “boosted [her] spirits.” Another individual is thanked for her “love, support and humor” that “enriched” her life.



Adding a homey touch to her accolades, an author expressed “special gratitude” to the owners of her temporary lodgings, “who sent me off with a gift of homemade blackberry jam,” and to colleagues “who listened thoughtfully over weekly breakfasts to a series of shifting ideas in a continual blizzard of drafts.” Her editor “didn’t simply read the manuscript, he inhaled it.” Another “extraordinary” editor accomplished “ridding the text of remaining cobwebs . . . sharing brilliant minds and prodigious energy.” Her typist “kept an eagle eye for errors and maintained her good humor . . . combine[ing] first rate work with acts of kindness and moments of great fun.”

The “homey touch,” that is, the desire to bring into the acknowledgment something ordinary yet colorful (perhaps to provide relief from the weightier academic and intellectual matters that follow) is also apparent in another author’s reference to a “close friend,” who helped her to “sketch out the structure of the book on a napkin at the Au Bon Pain”—a restaurant in Cambridge or Boston.

A study dealing with particular problems of women “has been a labor of love and sorrow. Along the way I have been blessed with the companionship of many people who . . . held me with their emotional, intellectual and financial support.” The same author also thanks her mother “for her passion of poetry and art,” her grandmother and sister, and a friend “for her generous spirit, irreverence and passion for music and writing.” An “extraordinary group of scholars” taught her “about the life of the mind and the power of intellectual thought as a tool of liberation.”

The author of a 1996 study exemplifies lyrical effusiveness to an unusual degree:

[T] offered me the treasure of his ironic humor and his loyal friendship. [U] gave me the courage and strength to make my feminism a part of my sociology; her warmth and support helped to stay the course. [V] cared for me in the same deep and honest way he cares for the world. [W] was always available to buy me coffee, listen to my complaints and offer his reassurances. [X] was and is both my harshest critic and one of my most unflagging and generous supporters. . . . To each of these people I am eternally grateful. . . .

[Y] agonized with me over each step of the process. She stayed inside my head and constantly nourished my soul. [Z] gave me her friendship at a time when I felt lost in an unfamiliar wilderness . . . offering both comfort and insightful criticism . . . .

My manuscript editor . . . impressed and overwhelmed me with her amazing attention to detail.

Many thanks are also due to my husband . . . for all the times he did the dishes and went to the grocery store and folded the laundry and cooked the dinner and watered the plants even though it wasn’t his turn . . . for fixing the leaking roof in my study. . . . [H]is own vision and artistry were a constant source of inspiration. . . . [F]rom the depth of my heart I smother with kisses, shower with flowers and promise an endless supply of frozen yogurt desserts to my beloved mother.

From the acknowledgments of a 1988 volume we learn that “it sometimes feels as though my friends and colleagues have dragged me through the project.” Moreover, “I would have never completed this work without the constant prodding, critiques and suggestions from . . . the best editor I have ever known and a treasured friend and colleague.” Such self-effacing confessions permeate the tributes written by women perhaps even to a greater degree than those of their male colleagues.

Let me briefly list a few further characterizations—intellectual and emotional—of the helpers found in these acknowledgments: “I dedicate this book to my mother and father . . . for their love and patience . . . and to my sisters . . . and their families for their friendship and support over the years”; “I absorbed as much of [the manuscript reviewers’] brilliant and erudite feedback as I could manage.” “I have entered a state of permanent indebtedness to [X]. His cautious praise . . . kept me optimistic and humble.” “[Y]’s gifts of skill and wit made the journey from manuscript to book painless.”

Elsewhere, editors are thanked for their “wisdom, good humor and endurance” and a reader of the manuscript “for his endless wisdom and emotional support.”

In a 1986 study, the author reveals that “[They] shared the anxieties and elations of graduate school and first jobs with me and I still rely on them for advice and support.” “My dance classes and MCI’s phone service provided me with much needed outlets during the process of research and writing.” [X] helped me find important ideas buried beneath sometimes half-baked thoughts.” “His belief in me, when I stopped believing in myself, made a difference.” “My special thanks to [the Ys] who opened their house, their ice cream freezer and Shakespeare and Company to me in a last idyllic summer of writing.” “Three final debts—to my parents, who laid the foundation for this book by teaching me that life derives its richness from our relationships with others . . . to my children, who continue to instruct me in these lessons.” “[Z] went far beyond providing an organizational home for the project. He challenged me.” And so it goes.

It should be fairly clear from such quotes (and other tributes not cited) that there is no fundamental difference between the spirit, style, and substance of acknowledgments produced by males and females. But there are some differences. In the tributes produced by women there is far more reference to parents and siblings than in those of men. Women mentioned nurturance and love (received) far more frequently than men. It seemed that writing a book was even more anxiety producing for women than for men. Sometimes this was made quite explicit:

I find that when I try to write I am productive and enjoy the process about 5 percent of the time. The other 95 percent is pretty miserable. I am either producing bad drafts . . . , going down false alleys, worrying that I have nothing new to

say . . . , that what I have to say is wrong, or just plain wishing I was doing something else. Something easier. As a result I would never have produced this book without a lot of help. I needed encouragement that it was worth doing [and] experts to help me get the facts right, friends to help me decide which drafts to keep.

It testifies to the truth of the statement quoted that its author assembled the largest army of helpers of any in this informal study: an astonishing total of 124 individuals are listed and thanked with varying degrees of intensity. That includes parents, a mother-in-law, lots of brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, and her husband. Regarding the latter she writes: "I could fill several books with all the ways I should acknowledge the contributions of my husband."

It seems that producing the works in question was more fraught with doubt and uncertainty for women, that their need for support and encouragement was even more voracious than the corresponding needs of men.

Acknowledgments with their endless references to the vast amounts of support received invite the speculation about the needs of authors. But why do these authors profess to have such a huge, almost insatiable need for moral support and encouragement? Why this apparent precariousness of authorial motivation? What pressures compel these implausibly modest self-presentations?

Behind the façade of acknowledgments there may be a less inspiring, or at least far more prosaic reality. Academics, and especially those among them who write and publish books, are highly competitive, often abrasively individualistic and not always affable "team players." Sad to say, not all academic marriages are redolent with the generosity of the spirit, not all academic intellectuals are immersed in marital bliss and are beneficiaries of stimulating intellectual exchanges with their spouses. Many academics are not especially anxious to devote vast amounts of their time to discussing, reading, or improving the writings of their colleagues. Moreover, and regrettably so, not all foundations are ready to shower us with grants and not all deans anxious to give us leaves to further the creative process; many editors are less than magnificently endowed with the skills needed to improve our manuscripts or interested in the ideas we wish to convey. (Editors, as part of the publishing enterprise are duty bound to focus on the "bottom line," which often means relentless pressure to shorten and simplify manuscripts in deference to market considerations.)

How then may one attempt to account for the tone and quality of acknowledgments and the gap between appearance and reality they so strongly suggest?

Scholarly acknowledgments are a ritual, a form of paying lip service to deeply entrenched conventions. They are social facts in exactly the sense Durkheim

used the term: external to the individual, taken for granted and exerting strong pressure to conform to their unwritten requirements. They are opportunities for affirming and re-affirming the values of one's profession, marital bonds, collegial ties, and a sense of community within the academic setting. They also represent a façade concealing unstated motives, calculations, and compulsions.

Academic intellectuals like most ordinary mortals, conform, consciously or not, to many social-cultural expectations, norms, and values. In their acknowledgments they appear to seek to reassure the reader that, despite their rigorous, dedicated, and somewhat impersonal scholarly pursuits, they did not cease to be regular human beings. There is a need to show that they are capable of warmth, affection, feeling, and gratitude, that they are still enmeshed in personal relations, and that they have not become isolated, humorless workaholics churning out publications to improve their standing in their profession, and get promotions and pay raises.

In other words, acknowledgments intend to show that success and accomplishment have not gone to the head of their author, that he remains a modest person, an ordinary fellow, a team player and good family man or woman, a member of his or her group and community who is not embarrassed to rely on the help of others. A well-known historian dedicates his book to the local "Boys Soccer Team," which he had "the pleasure of coaching"—an activity he regards as "a wonderful escape from one's books, files and statistics" and one which happily proves that he is not a "single-minded scholar." Elsewhere an editor of a volume confides in the reader that the book was conceived in the congenial atmosphere of "an intense week of debate interrupted by cutting onions and uncorking bottles." There were all the other nostalgic recollections of sharing ice cream, frozen yogurt, coffee, hearty meals and displaying other expressions of reassuring and cheerful ordinariness. In all such references there lurks a recognition of and implicit deference to the surviving anti-intellectual traditions of American life.

As to the tendency to name dropping—the lengthy lists of benefactors, often more distinguished than the author—there is safety in numbers and, in associating the work with other individuals, a bolstering of credibility notwithstanding the incantation that none of those mentioned are responsible for the views expressed or conclusions reached. This is not to deny that large-scale data collection does involve large numbers of people who deserve credit for their work.

The extravagant and often lyrical praise of spouses may in part be explained by the character of many academic marriages leading to a compensatory motivation on the part of husbands. Even in more recent times male academics are often married to comparably well-educated women, who raise children, take care of the household, do volunteer work, or have part time jobs and make little use of their education or professional qualifications. (This was especially the case during the 1960s and 1970s.) Such a disparity is often a source of marital tension and spousal frustration, especially since the rise of

militant feminism. Husbands whose careers often rest on spousal support have reason to feel some guilt or unease under these circumstances. The extravagant praise of wives and their intellectual contribution to the work in question is likely to be an attempt to compensate spouses whose professional competence, educational qualifications, and intellectual potential were not fully realized, if at all. To be sure this explanation cannot be extended to the female author's tributes to the men (or women) in their lives.

The implausibly modest and self-effacing tone of so many acknowledgments may be rooted in the deep-seated and durable American cultural and psychological conflict between the values of egalitarianism and achievement. Successful academic intellectuals apparently feel some pressure to play down their accomplishments, or claims to excellence (at any rate in public statements) and they do so energetically and with apparent conviction on the occasion here discussed. The public display of humility moderates the individualistic, accomplishment-driven motives that lead—in the case of academics—to the writing of books. Producing a scholarly volume is intended not merely to advance knowledge. Only the well-published academic can expect to rise in his profession; he may not “perish” without publishing, but access to tenure, higher rank and salary, or more distinguished places of employment is based on publications and the attention they attract. Whatever the intrinsic rewards of research and writing, they cannot be separated from such extrinsic rewards and from the authors' mobility aspirations. Many Americans, and especially academic intellectuals, while intensely driven to succeed, are somewhat ambivalent about a high social-professional status and the income that goes with it, about being part of a society in which rewards are unequally distributed. Many highly educated Americans yearn for lesser inequalities, for genuine equality of opportunity, or better yet, equality of condition or reward.

The self-effacing attitudes here noted may also have something to do with an unease about being a full-time intellectual, a bookish, reflective person in a culture that values action, teamwork, and physical strength and nurtures a degree of suspicion of intellectuals and reflection. As Saul Bellow noted, “the main facts of American life are productive. The overwhelming fact is that of a manufacturing and business civilization. Money, production, politics, planning, administration, expertise . . . these are what absorb mature men.”<sup>5</sup>

It is a further possibility that the sociologists' large contribution to the production of these apologetic and self-denigrating acknowledgments has something to do with the uncertain status and accomplishments of their discipline. Sociology is a newcomer to the academic world, its recognition as a legitimate discipline relatively recent. It remains difficult to explain even to well-educated people what exactly sociologists do, or hope to accomplish, whether it is a scientific discipline or not, and how it has contributed to either our welfare or enlightenment.

Sociologists by virtue of the basic premises of their discipline are also more aware of the social aspect or implication of any activity, of the links between the strictly individual and the social, hence the insistent linking of their work to the cooperation and advice of their colleagues, friends, or relatives. From the sociological point of view, hardly any human activity is without a group connection or influence.

These effusive, self-effacing tributes also reflect the intellectuals' attempt to gain control over an inherently anxiety-producing situation—the writing and publishing of a book. Much is at stake when an academic volume is launched and everything possible has to be done by the author to reassure himself that the effort was worth making and the book deserves a favorable reception.

Acknowledgments finally provide an opportunity for a personalized, non-intellectual, self-presentation—for showing that the author is a decent human being, likeable and well liked, well connected and integrated into his occupational setting, conscious of his familial and collegial obligations, modest, and good natured. In these tributes authors seek to shed some light on the human being behind the academic intellectual and its highly specialized occupational role; they also provide a glimpse at a wishful fantasy of a way of life and relationships that academic intellectuals aspire to.

### Notes

1. Although this is an impressionistic account, the reader is entitled to know how I chose my sources and examples. The selection process was truly “random” though not in a social scientific sense. First I looked at my own books, which accumulated over a period of forty years; subsequently at those of three colleagues, each of whom has different professional interests reflected in his library.  
How did I choose the actual volumes from these four collections? How did I decide which ones to take off the shelf?  
I disregarded slim volumes (on the assumption that there was in them less to acknowledge) and those published before the 1960s, since I did not intend a historical survey. I also avoided considering acknowledgments that were very short, that is, less than a page.  
Even after noting such criteria of selection, there remained a partial randomness to the actual process of selection. I was less inclined to reach for books that were physically less accessible, i.e., on very high or very low shelves. What books placed high or low had in common and what bias their placement and subsequent avoidance (on my part) introduced is hard to say.  
All this still leaves open the question: What is the likely ratio of books with short acknowledgments (and lacking in the attributes which inspired this essay) and those longer and effusive? Whatever the ratio, there is a huge number of books with the kind of acknowledgments examined here.
2. Eugene Goodheart, *The Reign of Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 18.
3. In a famous volume in social psychology, 63 individuals were thanked; in a well-known sociological study 67, in another one 103. The number peaked at 124.
4. All quotes are anonymous, since I do not wish to embarrass anybody. I took, however, note of the source of each quote and on request can supply them to the reader doubtful of their authenticity.
5. Saul Bellow, “Scepticism and the Depth of Life,” in *The Arts and the Public*, ed. James E. Miller and Paul D. Herring (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).