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THE DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS

I believe that it is high time we got rid of the antithesis between "social statics" and "social dynamics," which was introduced by Comte a century ago and which is still very influential. A good example of its persisting influence is that Sorokin in his *Society, Culture and Personality* explicitly accepts Comte's antithesis, although his earlier, most famous work is devoted to *Social and Cultural Dynamics*.

Nowadays few sociologists use the word "statics," but they have substituted for it the term "social structure," in contrast with "social change." Most textbooks include a number of chapters about "social structure," and then separate chapters about "social changes," some books deal almost exclusively with "social structure," others exclusively with "social change." And the term structure (sometimes "institutional structure") has been applied to total "societies" on all levels, in the sense in which Comte and later Spencer conceived them, that is, as territorially circumscribed, politically united collectivities. But many sociologists apply it also to rural communities, some to cities, and most of them think that every organized group has a structure of its own.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Now, what is the implication of the concept of structure? It obviously goes back to the natural sciences. Whatever has a structure must be a system of interdependent components. A complex organism, as a system, has an anatomical structure. A chemical compound has a structure, inasmuch as it is a system of interconnected elements. Even such a technicel product as a building has a structure, composed of bricks and pieces of wood. Moreover, systems can be classified by their structure. Zoologists and paleontologists have classified animals by their anatomical structure, and chemical compounds are classified by the way in which their elements are interconnected,

How about social systems? Shall we assume that every social system, from a large society to a small family, has a structure, because it is composed interdependent human beings as elementary units? This would take us back to the old doctrine that human collectivities or societies can be explained by the biological or psychological essence of their individual entities. Although quite a few psychologists still like this doctrine, it is no longer accepted by sociologists, On the contrary, sociologists are attempting to explain human psychology as, at least in part, the result of individual participation in collective life.

The fact is that the majority of contemporary sociologiste are investigating, not men, but *social interaction* between men; and social interaction involves combinations of social actions, i.e., actions of which men are the main objects, as distinct from technical actions, actions of religious cultus, or actions producing and reproducing works of art. If so, then social systems must be systems of social actions; and actions are dynamic.

Does this preclude the use of the concept of social structure? Apparently not. For I need not remind you of Talcott Parson's *The Structure of Socia1 Actions*; and I must confess that even I, in my hook on *Social Actions*, published a year before Parson's, included a chapter on "The Composition and Structure of Social Actions."

The problem now is: What kind of empirical evidence are sociologists using when they define and classify social system by their structures? This evidence is derived from the cultural *standards* and *norms* with which social actions and the combinations of social actions performed by interacting agents are supposed to conform. Most of these standards and norms are explicitly formulated, orally in traditions, customs, and mores, or in written documents - legal, political, ethical, and religious. So long as the formulated rules of social interaction remain the same, the social systems to which they apply are supposed to be essentially alike and have the same kind of structure. Therefore, any changes which occur must be causally explained by external influences,

Now, we cannot deny that verbally formulated standards and norms of social interaction are important empirical sources for sociological studies - especially when we are studying the social systems of a distant past. How little we would know about the political life of Babylonia without the Code of Hammurabi, or about the social life of Ancient Egypt without documentary evidence concerning the standards and norms which regulated its religious, intellectuel, administrative, military, and economic activities! But even accepted standards and norms are not sufficient evidence for the development of a consistent, inclucive theory of social systems. If we agree that social systems are systems of interdependent *social\_actions* - and the factual evidence that they are is overwhelming - we must investigate the actions themselves in order to discover not only what people are supposed to do in interacting with each other, but what they really are doing, This is, of course, a much more difficult task. It leeds us to the conclusion thet every social system is dynamic; that the many variations of social systems include all kinds of changes; and that, by studying comparatively social systems in the course of their active performance, we can eventually solve the problems which the old approach has left unsolved and sometimes even unnoticed.

During the last eighteen years, with the help of a few assistants and many students, I have been trying to develop gradually such a dynamic approach to all kinds of social systems. Because social systems and human collectivities in general can last only if the agents participating in them cooperate with one another, I concentrate entirely on cooperation, and consider conflicts, both within and between systems, as of secondery importance.

I distinguish four logical classes of social systems, differing in complexity and size. First, *social relations*, or interpersonal relations, as systems of functionally interconnected actions of two cooperating individuals (e.g., husband and wife, perent and child, brothers, sisters, business partners); second, *social roles*, as systems of functionally integrated cooperative relations between a particular individual and a number of others (e.g., a teacher and his pupils, a physician and his patients, a merchant and his customers, a minister of religion and participants in his congregation); third, *social groups*, as functionally integrated systems of social roles which their members perform; and, fourth, *societies*, as systems of diversified, functionally integrated social groups.

If we investigate such systems *from the time when they begin to be formed and throughout their duration*, we find that they are *inherently* changing, whether rapidly or slowly, and always include a sequence of new actions. A mother-child relation starts to be formed even before the child is born; and, after its birth, both mother and child continuously react in new ways toward each other. Probably all of you have been partners in intersexual relations of mutual love. Remember how these relations started and were gradually formed; how, in the course of time, they came to include a multiplicity of new actions, especially if you married your beloved, and your mutual love persisted through years. I have been a partner in such a relation for thirty-eight years and can testify that there never was and still isn't anything static about it.

Although social relations whose partners conform with the same standards and norms are sufficiently alike to be classified together, yet a comparative study of what particular individuals are doing in such a relation indicates that there are many variations, often also deviations, sometimes even conflicts. Moreover, as anthropologists and sociologists are becoming graduelly aware, when culturel patterns of certain relations are transmitted by the older to the younger generation, their standerds and norms frequently change, though it may take a long time for those changes to be explicitly formulated. Some degree of the "revolt of youth", with resulting minor innovations, is a videly spread phenomenon.

Social roles are more important sociologically than social relations, for the majority of social relations form integral parts of social roles and must be studied as such. I borrowed the term social role from Park and Burgess twenty-five years ago, and have redefined it gradually, so as to make it more useful heuristically. I cannot take time now to compare social roles with theatrical roles. As a matter of fact, however, the simillarities underlying the differerences justify the use of this common term.

Every social role is performed within a social circle of people, be they few or many, who accept a particuler individual as a presumably valuable person suitable for the performance of this role. A comparative study of the emergence of particular social roles shows that an individual is accepted and evaluated positively as a person when he has already started to perform or is expected to perform sooner or later definite actions which are considered desirable by participants in his circle, because they will contribute something to the values which the circle shares. These actions together constitute his function as the central person in the social circle. His circle cooperates with him by granting him and actively supporting those rights which he needs to perform effectively his function. In short, it is the individual's function, dynamic combination of his actions, which is the main component of his role as a system. It conditions the composition and size of his circle, the circle's conception of him as a person, and the rights which are granted to him. This applies to all kinds of social roles, from those of fathers of familles, merchants, industriel managers, physicians, priests, military commanders, poets, and artists, up to kings, emperors, presidents of republics, and dictators.

You are probably wondering why I have not mentioned "status" in connection with roles. I formerly used this term to denote the rights of a person who is performing a specific function. But I found that there are several different definitions of status in current use. According to the main definition of Ralph Linton,[[2]](#footnote-2) the status of an individual "represents his position with relation to the total society", and includes "a collection of rights and duties." Some modifications of Linton's concept have been introduced recently. To avoid confusion with these verious uses, I have dropped the term altogether. In the twelve chepters on Social Roles in the book I am now writing, I have not used it once, for the simple reason that I did not need to do so.

The most significant aspect of a comparative study of social roles is the evolution of new varieties. This is well illustrated by the evolution in the course of human history of the co-called occupational roles, i.e., roles which include economic remuneration. In tribal societies, seldom more thon 15 specialized occupations are found. In some contemporary Arab cities (e.g., Demascus), slightly more than 300 were recently observed. In the United States, twenty thousand different occupations havs been listed by competent investigators.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Especially significant is the evolution of professionel roles, i.e., those which require a high level of education, for instance, those of scientists. No such roles existed in any society thirty centuries ago, but now there are at least 400 different varieties of scientific specialists.

In surveying this evolution, we find, whenever evidence is available, that the development of every new variety of social role starts with the emergence of a new function, usually on the initiative of some individual innovator who gains a circle of followers or sponsors. Some circles expand from few individuals to thousands, or even millions - e.g., the circles of famous poets, prophets of new religions, military heroes, and political leaders. Remember the tremendous expansion of Hitler's social circle, which began with less than 10 followers.

A comparative study of orgenized social groups, or associations, from the time of their formation throughout their duration leads to an analogous conclusions. Nearly every social group which we have investigated begins for the purpoee of performing cooperatively a collective function. This applies, for instance, to educational groups, from primary schools up to colleges; religious groups, from local parishes through monasteries to ruling groups of high priests; military groups on all levels: political parties; administrative, legislative, and juricical groups; local and regional clubs; secret and pseudo-secret associations; industrial and financial combinations; labor unions; and intellectual associations.

Once such a group is formed and gains enough members to cooperate in the performance of its collective function, especa1ly if it is long-lasting, the social roles of at least some of its members become institutionalized. This means thet each of the specific functions which these members enact is considered so important for the lasting performance of the collective function of the group that there must always be somebody to enact it. When a particuler individua1 for some reason ceases to do so, somebody else takes it over - e.g., dean of college, abbot of monastery, chairman, secretary, or treasurer of a club, industrial manager, ete. This does not imply, however, that he must perform his role exactly as his predecessor performed it. Even in a relatively conservative social proup, individuals who perform institutional roles are allowed or even expected to do something new on behalf of the group, especially if the collective function of the group is affected by external influences.

New yarieties of social groups, like new varieties of social roles, have been continually evolving in the course of history. In preliterate societies, apart from clans, which are hardly specialized, relatively few organized groups with differentiated functions are found. I shall not try to enumerate the different varieties of social groups existing right now in American society. However, it is common knowledge that there are at least 200 seperate religious groups, each with some functionally specialized subgroups; nearly fifty ethnic varieties of immigrants and their descendants, with different cultures, each with 10 to 30 local and regional groups; a multiplicity of industrial and commercial groups; a number of local governmental groups in each of the 48 states; many Federal administrative groups; and numerous scientific, literary and artistic associations.

In this evolution we see two significant trends: the integration of a number of smaller groups into larger groups, and the division or large groups into smaller ones, which sometimes results in their seperation. Comparative study of these processes indicates that they are due to functional innovations. For instance, the formation of the National Association of Manufacturers or the C.I.O. was started on the initiative of leader, who succesfully superimposed a common collective function upon the more or less diverse functions that smaller groups performed. On the other hand, the developeent of specialized colleges within universities was manifestly the result of increasing growth and differentiation of collective educational functions. The seperation of Sociometry, of the Ruael Sociological Society, and - more recently - of the Society for the Study of Social Problems from the American Sociological Society was also due to the growth of specialization. Right now, the formation of a separate division for the Air Force, previously included partly in the army and partly in the navy, is obviously a long overdue result of steadily increasing innovations.

I have been trying to develop a similar approach to the study of societies as systems of integrated social groups, from their early beginnings throughout their duration, believing that such on approach will eliminate the old idea that a society has a static structure. I have already applied it to the evolution of modern national culture societies. It can also be definitely applied to the evolution of ecclesiastic societies, political societies, and economic (especially communistic) societies. And it should enable us to anticipate and to plan the future formation of an integrated world society, superimposed upon - but not substituted for - the many diverse contemporary societies.

So why should sociologists spend their precious time and energy looking for structures in the continually changing, dynamic movement of social systems from the simplest to the most complicated, from social relations to social roles, to groups, to societies, to a world society?

1. There are some exceptions, e.g., the attempt of Edward A. Ross to develop sociology as a general theory of "social processes" and contemporary monographic studies of "group dynamics." [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Study of Man*, 1936, p. 113 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See H. Dewey Anderson and Percy H. Davidson, *Occupational Trends in the United States*, 1940 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)