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BASIC PROBLEMS OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGY*

The problems which I am about to discuss are basic in the sense that the further development of sociology as a science and the possibility of its effective application to contemporary social problems depend on their solution.

In surveying the studies in which the majority of American sociologists have recently been engaged, we notice certain predominant trends. First, a striving for methodical perfection, although the standards of perfection still differ considerably, if not so much as they did thirty years ago. Second, the selecting of specific problems which can presumably be solved by the factual evidence derived from direct observation of individual behavior or from information about individual attitudes obtained by symbolic communication. Third, the testing of hypothetical solutions by searching for more factual evidence and using it in accordance with the same methodical standards.

Thus, most of the research of American sociologists is carried on within areas where these conditions can be fulfilled. Such an area may be a laboratory, a clinic, a hospital, a place where a small number of people regularly congregate, a kindergarten, a school building with or without its neighborhood, a classroom within a college or a whole college campus, a prison, a summer camp, a military center, a section of a factory or an entire factory, sometimes also the area where

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the workers live, a village, a town, the habitat of a tribal or rural community, or an ecological part of a city. If the area is relatively large and contains too many people for direct observation and communication, a presumably relevant sample is chosen. Eventually, the same investigator or other investigators carry on the same kind of research in other similar areas.¹

Undoubtedly, many of these studies have either reached or probably will reach scientifically valid sociological or sociopsychological conclusions. Unfortunately, the significance of these conclusions for the advancement of sociology as a general science is limited. Most of the investigators are concerned only with what is occurring within the relatively narrow field of their research during the time while the research is going on. They ignore the enormous multiplicity and complexity of social phenomena developing on the national scale, the continental scale, and the world-wide scale, as well as the historical background of these phenomena. They seem to be unaware that the most urgent task of sociologists is to investigate these phenomena and find some solutions for the pressing practical problems which they involve.

Of course, a minority of sociologists do include studies of these phenomena in their general sociological theories. As we know, such theories started in the middle of the nineteenth century, and their generalizations extend far beyond the limits of any particular area or any particular country during any particular time. Certainly, most of these theories have proved in some respects methodically defective, and the factual evidence which they use is not always as reliable as that of our local researchers. But is it not better to have defective general theories with insufficient evidence than no theories at all? Their defects can eventually be corrected and their evidence supplemented by new evidence.

I believe that the most serious defect of our systematic sociological theories, a defect which goes back to Auguste Comte, is the antithesis between "social statics" and "social dynamics." Although nowadays relatively few sociologists use the term "statics," they have substituted for it the term "social structure," in contrast with "social change." Many textbooks include a number of chapters about social structures and then separate chapters about social changes. Some books deal almost exclusively with social structure; others exclusively with social change. The term "structure" has been applied to total "societies" on all levels, in the sense in which Comte and his continuators conceived societies, that is, as

¹ This survey is based partly on reports of Research Committees of the American Sociological Society, but mainly on articles published in sociological periodicals. Similar trends, though less general, are noticeable among British and French sociologists.

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 social group has a structure of its own.²

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 has an anatomical structure. A chemical compound has a structure, inasmuch as it is a system of interconnected elements. Even such a technical product as a house has a structure, composed of interconnected stones or bricks and pieces of wood. Moreover, systems can be classified by their structures. Zoologists and paleontologists have classified animals by their anatomical structures, and chemical compounds are classified by the way in which their elements are interconnected.

How about social systems? Should we assume that every social system, from a large society down to a small family, has a structure because it is composed of human beings as elementary units? This would take us back to the old doctrine that every human collectivity or society must be explained by the biopsychological essence of individual participants. It is the kind of human ontology which underlies most demographic studies, including statistics of human beings and their classification by specific indexes. It is favored by psychologists of certain schools.

However, the majority of contemporary sociological theories are actually based not on studies of men as ultimate entities, but on studies of social interaction between men. And social interaction involves combinations of social actions, i.e., actions of which men are the main objects. If this is so, then social systems must be *systems of social actions*.³

² Some sociologists, however, opposed the theory that society has a static structure. They introduced instead the conception of "social process" as the main component of society. "Its core is the notion of movement, change, flux... of society as a continual becoming" (cf. Max Lerner's article on "Social Process" in the *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*). This conception was first fully applied by Edward A. Ross in his main work *Principles of Sociology* (New York, 1920), based on a comparative study and classification of social processes. He describes thirty-five different processes. Recently, a different, scientifically more productive concept of social processes has been introduced by Joyce O. Hertzler. He uses it as a heuristic concept leading to the development of a systematic theory as a dynamic whole. Cf. *Society in Action: A Study of Basic Processes*, New York: The Dryden Press, 1954.

³ These actions obviously differ from actions which do not deal with men, but with other kinds of objects: actions of producing and using technical objects, actions of creating or recreating works of art, actions of religious cultus propitiating deities, actions of problematizing scientific theories, making new discoveries, and formulating new theories, and the like. (Cf. Florian Znaniecki, *Cultural Sciences*, University of Illinois Press, 1952.) There have been many controversies concerning the connection between social actions and these other categories of actions. Compare, e.g.,

Now, what kind of empirical evidence are sociologists using when they define and classify social systems (in the sense of systems of social actions) according to their structures? This evidence is derived from the standards of valuation and the norms of active conduct which the combinations of social actions performed by interacting agents are expected 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 theological. 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 a stable axionormative structure.

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 social life of ancient Egypt without documentary evidence concerning the standards and norms which regulated its religious, administrative, military, and economic activities! But standards and norms, even when explicitly formulated and accepted by the participants in a collectivity at a certain time, are not sufficient evidence on which to base a consistent, inclusive theory of social systems.

In the first place, if we agree that social systems are systems of interdependent social actions, we should study the actions themselves in order to discover not only what people are supposed to do, but what they are really doing. This is, of course, a much more difficult task. It means that we must investigate social systems from the time they begin to be formed throughout their duration. And since the social systems within a collectivity are not isolated, for the same individual simultaneously or successively participates in several systems, we shall find that the actions included in a particular system undergo various changes in the course of its duration, depending on its dynamic connections with other systems.

In the second place, as we know, the standards and norms which regulate social systems not only differ in human collectivities in various parts of the world, but have been changing everywhere, whether rapidly or slowly. Numerous new species of social systems have evolved in particular collectivities and expanded beyond their limits. Unless we want to ignore entirely the historical past of contemporary collectivities, we must investigate this evolution and expansion.

Pitirim A. Sorokin's famous work *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, 4 vols. (American Book Co.: New York, 1932–1941) with the recent joint work edited by Talcott Parsons and Edward S. Shils, *Toward a General Theory of Action* (Harvard University Press, 1951). These controversies, however, are being solved by the development of such special branches of sociology as industrial sociology, sociology of art, of religion, of knowledge.

For many years, with the help of a few assistants and numerous students, I have been trying to develop gradually a dynamic approach to all kinds of social systems. Because social systems and human collectivities in general last only if the agents who participate in them cooperate with one another, I have concentrated on the study of cooperation and considered the study of conflicts, whether within or between systems, as a secondary task.

I distinguish four logical classes of social systems. First, *social relations*, or interpersonal relations, as systems of functionally interconnected actions of two cooperating individuals; second, *social roles*, as systems of functionally integrated cooperative relations between a particular individual and a number of others; third, *social groups*, as functionally integrated systems of social roles which their members perform; fourth, *societies*, as systems of diversified, functionally integrated social groups.

Here I shall omit all reference to social relations,^{4**} for they have little, if any, direct influence upon those complex, statewide and world-wide social phenomena whose investigation should be the main task of contemporary sociologists. I begin, therefore, with social roles.

I borrowed the term “social role” from Park and Burgess twenty-five years ago and have redefined it gradually in an attempt to make it heuristically useful.⁵ I shall not take time now to compare social roles with theatrical roles, but merely state that, in my opinion, the similarities underlying their differences justify the use of this common term.

Every social role is performed within a *social circle* of people who accept a particular individual as a *person* presumably fit 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 participants in his circle consider desirable because they will contribute something to the values which the circle shares.

⁴ Some results of my studies will be given in a paper in the section on Social Theory under the title “The Dynamics of Social Relations.”

^{**} The paper mentioned in the footnote 4 was published in *Sociometry*, November 1954, Vol. 17, No. 4, pp. 299–303 [editor’s note].

⁵ I applied it in 1931–1933 at Teachers College, Columbia University, in my studies of the influence of American education upon the later lives of educands. The main results of those studies and studies of education in other countries were summarized and published in Polish (*The Men of the Present and the Civilization of the Future*, 1934). My later studies of social roles remain unpublished except for *The Social Role of the Man of Knowledge*, Columbia University Press, 1940.

These actions together constitute his *function* as the central person of this social circle. His circle cooperates with him by granting him and actively supporting those rights which he needs in order to perform effectively his functions. In short, it is the individual's function, a dynamic combination of his actions, which is the main component of his role as a system. This typically applies to such roles as that of a physician in relations with his patients, a craftsman or merchant in relations with his customers, a minister of religion in relations with his parishioners, and a college student in relations with his instructors and fellow-students.

You are probably wondering why I do not mention "status" in connection with role. I formerly used this term to denote the rights of a person who is performing a specific function. But at least half a dozen different definitions of status have been used during the last eighteen years.⁶ To avoid confusion with these various uses, I have dropped the term altogether. In the twelve chapters 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.

If we study social roles comparatively in historical perspective, we find a continual evolution of new varieties. This is well illustrated by the evolution in the course of human history of the so-called occupational roles, i.e., roles which include economic remuneration. In tribal societies, more than fifteen specialized occupations are seldom found. In the United States in 1940, nearly twenty thousand different occupations were listed by competent investigators.⁷ A very significant example is the evolution of the social roles of scientists. No such roles existed in any society forty centuries ago; four centuries ago, hardly more than a dozen specialized roles could be distinguished, all of them in the domain of the natural sciences. But now there are about three hundred different varieties of specialists in natural and cultural sciences.

In investigating 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 personal function*, usually on the initiative of some individual innovator who gains a circle of followers or sponsors.

Another significant historical trend is the expansion of social circles. Judging from ethnological and archeological evidence, the great majority of social roles were originally performed within very limited social circles, including only

⁶ Cf. Ralph Linton's two definitions in his book *The Study of Man*, 1936; some later modifications of his definitions; new changes introduced into the old definitions, based on class stratification; the definition of status as membership in organized groups; and the different conceptions used by investigators of social attitudes.

⁷ H. Dewey Anderson and Percy H. Davidson, *Occupational Trends in the United States*.

those people with whom a particular person directly interacted; and many social roles are still so limited. But in the course of history the social circles of some persons who initiated certain functions expanded far beyond these limits and came to include thousands or even millions of people. This was possible whenever such a person gained assistants with auxiliary roles who acted as intermediaries between him and other people with whom he could not directly interact. These assistants compose what I call his "inner circle." Eventually, this inner circle can also expand and include assistants of assistants. I shall mention only briefly some instances of this expansion.

Historically the most important was the emergence of the roles of kings in Asia, Africa, and Europe, who with the aid of inner circles of military leaders, priests, and administrators assumed the function of integrating tribal communities into states. The emergence of the roles of dictators in recent times has been startling. Hitler, for instance, began with a circle of less than ten followers and became "der Führer" of millions of Germans within and outside of Germany. The communist dictators – Lenin, Stalin, and recently Mao – acquired very large social circles. Rather different has been the expansion of the social circles of the religious prophets, e.g., Mohammed and Luther. We are familiar with the expansion of the social circles of the famous men of letters, artists, and inventors. In the domain of economics, the vast expansion of the circles of employees and customers of men like John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and Henry Ford is instructive.

Since this expansion of social circles is still going on, a sociological theory of the modern world must include a comparative investigation of these dynamic processes in all kinds of social roles. While there are many thousands of individual biographies, no adequate general theory of such processes has yet been developed.

In my investigations of social groups during the last fifteen years, I omitted entirely "primary groups" in Cooley's sense, informal groups, and short-lasting groups, for studies of them contribute little, if anything, to the solution of the large-scale *new problems* which sociologists have to face. We concentrated on relatively large, organized social groups which last for a lengthy period of time.⁸ A comparative study of the origin and development of many such groups indicates that nearly every one of them begins to emerge at the joint initiative of a few leaders for the common purpose of performing together a *collective function*. After

⁸ See Florian Znaniecki "Social Groups in the Modern World" in *Freedom and Control in Modern Society* (D. Van Nostrand Company: New York, 1954, pp. 125–140), written in honor of Robert Morrison MacIver. There is considerable similarity between my theory of social groups and MacIver's theory of associations.

the leaders have gained enough followers who are willing to cooperate in the performance of this collective function, the group becomes purposely organized, i.e., the cooperating individuals assume the roles of members whose personal functions are integrated. If the group is expected to be active for a long time, the social roles of at least some of its members become institutionalized.⁹ This means that each of the specific personal 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 particular individual for some reason ceases to do so, somebody takes it over – for example, the dean of a college; head of an administrative group, industrial manager, president or secretary of a scientific association. This does not imply, however, that he performs his role exactly as his predecessor did. Even in a relatively conservative group, individuals who enact institutional roles are allowed and even expected to do something new on behalf of the group, especially if the collective function of the group is being affected by external influences.

Many of the groups which we investigated did not start new functions; they merely reproduced the functions of other groups which already existed elsewhere – for example, public schools in the United States, local churches of an established religious denomination, and local sections of political parties. But new, functionally specialized varieties of social groups, just as new varieties of social roles, have been steadily evolving in the course of history and continue to evolve.

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 two hundred separate religious groups, each with some functionally specialized subgroups; about fifty ethnic varieties of immigrants and their descendants, with different cultures, each with a number of local and regional groups; many scores of clubs; a multiplicity of industrial and commercial groups; labor unions; a number of governmental groups; and numerous scientific, literary, and artistic associations.

In the course of this evolution, we see two distinct trends. First, the unification of a number of smaller groups, already existing or purposely formed, into larger groups under centralized control. This may be accompanied by functional specialization of certain subgroups within the larger group. A well-known

⁹ See Florian Znaniecki "Social Organization and Institutions" in *Twentieth Century Sociology*, Gurvitch and Moore, eds., The Philosophic Library: New York, 1945.

example is the unification in modern times of numerous military groups, old and new, usually preceded or followed by some specialization of the military functions which the smaller groups perform. Another example is the unification of administrative or bureaucratic groups with increasingly specialized sections. Little specialization accompanied the unification of local Chambers of Commerce into a National Chamber. The development of political parties composed of regional and local groups did not lead to specialization by the latter.

The importance of this trend is obvious. The growing size of these groups results in their growing power. Compare the size and power of medieval military groups with such modern military groups as the German during the last two wars, or the American and the Russian right now. The German bureaucracy under the Nazi regime included four-and-half million persons. The federal bureaucracy of the United States rose in the last seventy years from a hundred thousand to about two million and a half. The connection between growth in size and growth in power has been studied.¹⁰ So far as political parties are concerned, the most instructive example is the growing size and power of the Communist Party from the time Lenin and Trotzky returned to Russia up to this day, when the Communist Party within the Soviet Union exerts supreme control over the Communist Parties in most other countries.

A different historical trend is the gradual integration into complex societies of many *separate*, specialized groups, whose diverse original functions have been evolving independently. I have been trying to investigate the development of these societies from their early beginnings, believing that such an approach will eliminate the idea that a society has a static structure. I have already applied it to the evolution of modern national culture societies.¹¹ It can also be definitely applied to the evolution of political societies, ecclesiastical societies, and probably economic societies. And it should enable us to anticipate and plan the future formation of an integrated *world society* superimposed upon, but not substituted for, the many diverse contemporary societies.

I do not claim that I have solved any of the sociological problems mentioned here. But I insist that they must be solved, not only for the advancement of sociology as a science, but also to enable social leaders to collaborate in planning and promoting cultural creativeness and the social integration of humanity in order to prevent cultural destruction and social disintegration.

¹⁰ See the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 292, March, 1954, "Bureaucracy and Democratic Government," for several good studies of this problem.

¹¹ *Modern Nationalities*, University of Illinois Press, 1952.

We know that it was the practical application of modern natural sciences, as they grew by new discoveries and developed new theories, which enabled technical leaders to plan and to achieve effective utilization of natural resources for human welfare and the protection of man against natural dangers. The task of sociology is much more difficult. Not only has its growth been slow and its influence upon social planning limited,¹² but the speed and range of new dynamic trends in the social domain have been increasing at a much faster rate than in the world of nature. If sociologists continue to go on as slowly as they do now, it will soon be too late to do any effective, large-scale social planning. Indeed, sociology itself may disappear completely, as it has behind the Iron Curtain.

¹² Cf. Florian Znaniecki "Sociological Ignorance in Social Planning," *Sociology and Social Research*, 30 (November-December, 1945), pp. 87–100.