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FROM SOCIAL RESEARCH

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## NEW DIRECTIONS IN THE STUDY OF ORGANIZATIONS AND SOCIETY \*

IN RECENT years we have witnessed the beginning of a new trend in the sociology of complex organizations. There is a growing interest in the relation of the organization to other social units not included in the organization itself. At first the study of organizations, seen as "formal structures," was completely separated from the study of social groups. Subsequently social life within the organization—"informal structures"—gained attention; this was a considerable achievement, and perhaps because it was such an impressive one, many students of organizations tended to focus their attention solely on this area of research.<sup>1</sup> Only in the last few years have organizational studies turned to systematic examination of the relations between organizations and external social units.

The relations of organizations to external units can be studied from three points of view.<sup>2</sup> The first is *interrelations among organizations*, that is, the patterns of interaction among various organizations. In the past it was mainly the relations between management and labor unions that were studied in this way, usually on a rather descriptive level. Recent studies have examined the relations between other organizations, such as universities and foundations, industries and churches, police departments and recreational centers. An important line of comparison in this area, neglected until recently, is the power differentials among organizations. Of special interest here are the relations between regulating agencies and the organizations they regulate. The political sociologist and the student of bureaucracy can learn much, for example, from comparisons of the various regulatory commissions from this point of view, particularly from a study of the differences between the National Labor Relations Board and the other commissions. The NLRB is the only commission that regulates relations between two well organized camps. The other commissions represent a

\* Editors' Note—This paper is based on one presented by the author at the annual meeting of the Eastern Sociological Society, April 11–12, 1959, New York.

<sup>1</sup> For recent reviews of research in this area see Harold L. Wilensky, "Human Relations in the Workplace: An Appraisal of Some Recent Research," in C. M. Arensberg and others, *Research in Industrial Human Relations* (New York 1957) pp. 25–50; Henry A. Landsberger, *Hawthorne Revisited* (Ithaca 1958).

<sup>2</sup> One of the few empirical studies that examine an organization from all three viewpoints discussed here is Harold L. Wilensky and Charles N. Lebeaux, *Industrial Society and Social Welfare* (New York 1958).

relatively unorganized public toward specific organizations (airlines, as an instance). These structural differences seem to make for considerable differences in the effectiveness of such commissions.

The relations of the *political forms of society* to various organizations is the second research perspective that is gaining in importance. This is the main area of articulation between political and organizational sociology. Selznick's study of the TVA is one of the outstanding examples of this orientation. Studies of public administration also fall in this category, though they still neglect more often than they examine the social factors involved. Some of the better community studies throw some light on this aspect of organizational theory, but they usually do not focus on it. Thus from the *Middletown* studies we can learn about the relations between the business and political elites on the one hand and such organizations as the school, the church, and the newspapers on the other hand. Hunter's and Miller's analyses enable us to gain some additional insight into these relationships. What is needed is more research that will focus directly on such problems.<sup>3</sup>

The third and perhaps the most neglected approach is systematic study of the interchange between organizations and *external collectivities*. This is the approach with which the present survey is primarily concerned. By collectivities is meant social units in which expressive (solidary and normative) functions dominate, such as the family, the community, and other primary groups. External collectivities are those outside the organization under study. The influence of organizations on the family, the community, social classes, ethnic and other groups has often been discussed and studied, especially under such titles as industrialization and bureaucratization, but the reverse relation has less frequently been examined. While there are many studies of the influence of these external units on individual actors, there has been little investigation of the influence of external collectivities as units on organizations as units.<sup>4</sup> Until recently most organizations were studied as "cases," isolated from their environment.

One of the important reasons for this tendency to neglect the influence of collectivities on the organizational activity is the widespread assumption that these groups are disintegrating. Durkheim was prob-

<sup>3</sup> The effect of political and religious authorities on universities is extensively analyzed by Amitai Etzioni and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, "Innovations in Universities," an introduction to a forthcoming work entitled *Historical Material on Innovations in Higher Education*, collected and interpreted by Bernhard J. Stern.

<sup>4</sup> For a fine new study in this area see Peter H. Rossi, "The Organizational Structure of an American Community," in Amitai Etzioni, ed., *Reader in Organizational Analysis* (New York 1960).

ably the most influential sociologist in developing the idea of the decline of the "traditional" primary groups, and the "anomic" consequences of this process. His idea was applied to the study of totalitarian movements, and it was suggested that atomized individuals are more open to fascist or communist appeals than persons well integrated in their social groups. Mayo, following Durkheim's concept of "occupational groups," suggested that industry can supply the bases for the formation of new primary groups, with management supplying the required leadership. Frank Tannenbaum has suggested that labor unions can fulfill this function.

Mayo's approach can be somewhat more strictly analyzed if his theorems are seen in the following context. Every society has to cope with the strains leading toward anomie by providing its members with meaning for their efforts. The meaning of human action is first built up in the process of socialization, and is then constantly reinforced by mechanisms of social control. Manipulation of sanctions (rewards and penalties) is a major means for both processes. There are two basic types of sanctions: instrumental, such as coercion and material rewards and penalties; and expressive, such as social and symbolic ones. The essential point here is that instrumental sanctions can regulate specific behavior, but diffuse behavior has to be reinforced by expressive sanctions. Moreover, the specific (instrumental) sanctions must eventually be supported by diffuse (expressive) ones. Hence the vital significance of expressive sanctions. Many organizations, especially those that are economic in character, such as industries, must resort mainly to instrumental sanctions, while expressive sanctions are mainly in the hands of collectivities. Hence the source of anomie in organizations may well lie in the disintegration of external primary groups. Mayo's suggestion is, then, that industries should supply expressive rewards internally, because they can no longer rely on external collectivities. The "human relations" ideologies and techniques are to a large degree built on the same assumptions.

This argument is open to criticism both on empirical grounds and from the viewpoint of its unintended consequences. On empirical grounds, it seems that the mass-society theory has strongly overdone the point about disintegration of primary groups. While some traditional groups have disintegrated or declined, such as the tribe, the clan, and the extended family, many others have adjusted to modern life and not disintegrated. Moreover, new bases for primary-group formation outside the industry have crystallized. These points should be examined in more detail.

The nuclear family was long considered to be losing functions and power, but sociologists of the family have recently agreed that the family was in a transitional period from which it is now emerging as a new unit with new powers; similar analysis could be applied to ethnic groups, to some racial groups, and to communities. To be sure, many of these groups are stronger among lower-class than among middle-class people, and therefore it might be contended that they cannot be counted on in a fully industrialized society, that they can be seen as a "cultural lag" and will eventually disappear. It seems, however, that this is not the case.

In the first place, the significance of the nuclear family in the middle and upper classes has been considerably increasing, as one can learn from recent demographic studies and reports on suburbia. And second, there are interesting and relevant developments with regard to religious activities. The earlier sociologists, many under the influence of the rational-liberal tradition or of Marxian philosophy, assumed that religion—and with it social life based on shared religious practices and beliefs—is in a process of continuous decline. But religious activity, like the family, seems to have become revitalized in a changed form more adapted to modern society. Religious activities have become more social and less normatively oriented. This is functional in two ways: it decreases the area of conflict between religion and the dominant secular ideologies; and it provides an important communal bond. Similar shifts and processes of adjustment are taking place in the nature of ethnic groups. Thus it seems justified to suggest that some important "traditional" primary groups are adjusting to modern society, rather than disintegrating.

As regards the emerging bases for the formation of new primary groups outside complex organizations, perhaps the best known examples are friendship groups, suburban neighborhood groups, and social clubs. S. M. Lipset showed in a recent article (in *Columbia Forum*) that a high rate of participation in voluntary associations seems to be a universal characteristic of modern societies, and not limited only to American society, as Tocqueville, another prophet of mass society, suggested.

If these generalizations are valid, mechanisms of socialization and social control embedded in primary groups can continue to function satisfactorily outside modern bureaucracies. Moreover, as was mentioned above, attempts to internalize primary groups into the organizational structure may actually create some of the dangers that the supporters of the mass-society school want to avoid, for such efforts

can result in the unintended creation of a potential totalitarian community.

Before this latter argument can continue, a conceptual distinction must be introduced between uni-system and multi-system primary groups. The uni-system groups are role clusters of actors in one system—at work, for example. The multi-system groups are groups of actors who maintain the same social relations in more than one social system. Thus a work group can be regarded as uni-system if the primary relations of the workers are limited to on-the-job relations. The workers become a multi-system group if they also maintain primary relations with their fellows after work.

As long as primary relations are limited to the work system they tend not to undermine other foci of loyalty, and therefore not to threaten the pluralistic structure of modern societies. But once occupational relations become the basis of multi-system groups there is a danger that such groups will become the main social units and the sole focus of loyalty for their members. This would mean that the pluralism of loyalties, which is a basis for pluralism of power centers, is undermined, and with it the various values whose existence is dependent on pluralism, such as democracy and tolerance. The fact that the bureaucracy is in itself an authoritative structure increases the totalitarian potential of such social units. We do not have to rely on our imaginations in order to visualize life in totalistic organizations. Reports of prisons, mental hospitals, monasteries, orphanages, one-industry towns, and some boarding schools suggest that organizations turned into communities are inclined to become totalistic in this sense. (Goffman examines the effects of totalism of organizations in his forthcoming book entitled *Total Institutions*.)

Mayo was in favor of "families" in industry not only as a means of avoiding social anomie but also as a technique for increasing motivation toward production and conformity. It seems, however, that in organizations that are "small societies" there is usually more tension and conflict, open and latent, and lower morale than in other organizations. The lack of segregation between work and non-work relations makes for transference of tensions from one area to another and accumulation of strain. The centralization of power conflicts intensifies regular inter-elite strife, as well as tensions between elites and the rank-and-file. In short, internalization of collectivities may not pay off at all. Perhaps a reflection of this is the tendency of many modern corporations to stop the direct supply of accommodations, social welfare, entertainment, and other services to their personnel. They prefer to

supply to other, relatively independent organizations the financial support needed to carry out these functions.

There are of course considerable differences among organizations as regards the extent to which they can rely on social control carried out in external collectivities rather than in internal primary groups. Thus monasteries may functionally require the latter type of organization, while industries cannot effectively use it; combat units of an army are from this viewpoint similar to monasteries, while peacetime military units may require an organization similar to that of three-shift industry.

All these propositions need thorough checking through intensive research. The main point of this paper is that while organizational research is paying increasing attention to the "environment" of organizations, still more is needed. And one of the areas most likely to reward more careful study is the interrelationship between organizations as units and external collectivities.

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