Toward a Theory of Societal Guidance

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ABSTRACT

An attempt to outline the basis for a macrosociological theory. The basic dimension is the ratio of guided over unguided processes. The central variables are those which characterize the guidance capacity and those guided. Mechanisms of societal guidance are explored in terms of downward controlling factors (knowledge, decision-making, and power) and upward consensus-forming processes as well as societal mobilization.

In an endeavor to develop a macrosociology, we focus on one central question: Under what conditions are societal processes more guided by the participants as against the conditions under which they are more "ongoing"? The higher the capacity to guide, the freer members of a society are of its history; the lower, the more they are subject to patterns they did not mold. We refer to societal units that have a relatively high capacity to guide their own processes as "active" and to those that have a relatively low capacity as "passive."

The degree to which an actor is active is affected by his cybernetic capacities, his relative power, and his capacity to build consensus. Each of these factors has both an internal and an external dimension: how much he knows about himself and about others, how much he can mobilize power over members and over non-members, and to what degree he can gain the support of subunits and of external units. Since for many purposes it is useful to treat cybernetic and power capacities together, we shall refer to them jointly as his ability to control. When his skill in building consensus is also taken into account, we refer to his ability to guide. Since we see the subunits and other units as having in principle the same capacities as the actor under study, his activation obviously cannot be optimized by maximizing his control capacities but by improving his combination of control and consensus-building, that is, his guidance mechanisms.

We turn now to explore the factors which affect the societal capacity to guide. Our approach is at first analytic in that each factor is examined as if all the others were held constant; in the last section we take a more synthesizing and historical view of actors that are becoming generally more active on all major dimensions. In the analytic section we compare briefly both societies and subsocieties. The societies we focus on are encapsulated in a state that serves as their chief organizational tool for both control and consensus-building. Similarly, the subsocietal actors are collectivities that have organizational "arms," such as a working class that has labor parties and trade unions. Societies without states and collectivities which are not organized are treated mainly for comparative purposes.

The purpose of the following discussion is "programmatic"; it seeks to illustrate
the kinds of factors and relationships on which a theory of societal guidance would focus and not to provide a full set of propositions, not to mention data, in support of such a theory. Those statements provided, however, have the basic format of propositions: they propose that, holding all other conditions equal, a change in a specific variable will correlate in a specific way with the active capacity of the unit under study.

I. CONTROL FACTORS

A. CYBERNETIC CAPACITIES

Societal units differ significantly in their capacity to collect, process, and use knowledge. This holds not only for corporations that compete for a market but also for political parties (Kennedy is believed to have used the social sciences more effectively than Nixon in the 1960 presidential campaign), federal agencies (the U.S. Air Force is thought to be more active in this respect than the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Army), and civic organizations (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s capacity to use information seems to have increased between 1955 and 1965).

The input of knowledge into a societal unit follows, we suggest, the same basic patterns of other inputs; that is, it might be blocked—and hence partially or completely lost for action purposes—at each stage of the process. The varying capacities of societal units for collecting information (“raw material” input) seem to be associated with economic affluence but not in a one-to-one relationship. If we were to order countries (or other societal units) by their average income per capita and then score their capacity to collect information, let us say, in terms of expenditure on research, we expect that the most affluent units would have a much higher capacity than the next affluent ones, while the remaining units would have few such capacities at all. Three powerful federal agencies in the United States, the Department of Defense, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and the Atomic Energy Commission, spent more of the federal research and development (R & D) funds than the other thirty-odd agencies combined, or 90.8 per cent of the available funds: Defense, 61 per cent; NASA, 20.3 per cent; AEC, 9.5 per cent. Three affluent states out of fifty gained more than 50 per cent of these R & D funds: California, 38.5 per cent; New York, 9.3 per cent; Massachusetts, 4.6 per cent.² Societal units’ spending on information has much accelerated in the last generations as compared to earlier ones.³ In short, patterns of interunit distribution of information seem significantly more egalitarian than are those of the distribution of economic assets.

The ratio of investment in collecting over processing information is an indicator of the sophistication of the cybernetic overlay and the knowledge strategy to which the particular unit subscribes. The United States and Great Britain, it seems, tend to invest relatively highly in collection; France, at least until recently, has stressed processing.⁴ A societal unit that empha-


³ Thus, for instance, the United States’ total federal expenditure on R & D in 1965 was approximately $14.8 billion; in 1955, $3.3 billion; in 1945, $1.6 billion. Data refer to fiscal years. They include R & D plant. See National Science Foundation, Federal Funds for Research, Development and Other Scientific Activities: Fiscal Years 1965, 1966 and 1967, Vol. XV, p. 4, Table 2. “90 to 95 per cent of all the behavioral scientists who ever lived are still alive” (Robert K. Merton, “The Mosaic of Behavioral Sciences,” in Bernard Berelson [ed.], The Behavioral Sciences Today [New York: Harper & Row, 1964], p. 249).

⁴ This is one meaning that is implied when the Anglo-Saxon tradition is characterized as “pragmatic” and the French as rationalistic. For some evidence, related to differences in economic planning, see Andrew Shonfield, Modern Capitalism: The Changing Balance of Public and Private Power (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 151–75. Also, see Fritz Machlup, The Production
sizes the collection of information disproportionately will, we expect, have a fragmented view of itself and its environment; it will have many "bits" but no picture, like survey data before tabulation. Such inadequate processing, we suggest, will tend to be associated with drifting (or passivity), because information that is not sufficiently processed is, in effect, not available for societal guidance.

On the other hand, a unit that overemphasizes processing is expected to have an "unempirical" view of itself and its environment, because it will tend to draw more conclusions from the available information than are warranted; it is similar to acting on the basis of a poorly validated theory. Thus, overprocessing is expected to be associated with hyperactivity, as the actor assumes he knows more than he does. Master plans used to guide economic development are typically hyperactive in their assumptions. Finally, societal units whose collection and processing are relatively balanced (not in absolute amounts but in terms of intrinsic needs of the guidance mechanisms) are expected to have comparatively more effective controlling overlays, all other things being equal, and to be active without being hyperactive.

Information that has been processed might still be wasted as far as the societal unit is concerned if it is not systematically introduced into the unit's decision-making and implementation overlay where the main societal "consumption" of information takes place. Two major variables seem useful for characterizing the different arrangements societal units have for interaction between the knowledge-producing and the decision-making units; one concerns the relative degree of autonomy of production, the other, the effectiveness of communications of the "product." It is widely believed that structural differentiation between the producers and consumers of information is necessary; fusion of the two kinds of units—for instance, in the management of a corporation—is viewed as dysfunctional both for production of knowledge and for decision-making. For societal units whose knowledge and decision-making units are differentiated, various modes and forms of articulation and communication exist whose relative effectiveness remains to be explored. Here we can touch on only one aspect of this intricate subject.

The controlling overlay itself has layers upon layers; processing is superimposed on the collecting of information, both in the logical sense that the one presupposes the other and in the structural sense that those engaged in processing tend to have higher ranks and more power to mold the societal input of knowledge than those who collect information. Differences in this internal structure of the controlling overlay seem to significantly affect the action capacity of societal units.

The effect of these structural differences is due not only to the fact that the amount and quality of information an actor has affect his capacity to act realistically but also to the fact that the knowledge units play an interpretative, and thus a political, role. For instance, which part of the available knowledge is used and what conclusions are reached on the basis of the knowledge available are in part determined by political considerations of the knowledge-producers. These are affected by the internal politics of the organizations in which knowledge is processed, by varying affiliations of the producers with political groupings in the society at large, and by the differential absorption capacity of various political elites of the societal units in which...
knowledge is produced. The core of the politization of knowledge lies not in deliberate or subconscious slanting of facts but in the cognitive and evaluative interpretive elements included in most items of knowledge. It is not, as some students of administration would have it, that knowledge units produce information and the political decision-making elites add the judgment. The producers of knowledge play an active role in formulating the judgments and, hence, in guiding societal action.

Within this context, one issue is of special significance for the study of societal guidance: The effects of the relative investments in two sublayers of the controlling overlayer—in production of transforming versus "stable" knowledge. Knowledge tied to transformation is concerned with exploring potential challenges to the basic assumptions of a system. Production of "stable" knowledge elaborates and respecifies, even revises, secondary assumptions within the basic framework of a knowledge system, but the framework itself is taken for granted. Decision-making elites, we suggest, tend to prefer the production of "stable" to transforming knowledge and seek closure on basic knowledge assumptions. One reason for this preference is that basic assumptions cannot be selected and reviewed on wholly empirical grounds. Hence, once consensus has been reached on the basic assumptions of a world view, a self-view, a strategic doctrine, it is expensive politically, economically, and psychologically for the elites to allow these assumptions to be questioned, which is necessary if they are to be transformed. They hence tend to become tabooed assumptions, and the elites attempt to guide knowledge production toward elaboration, additions, and revisions within their limits. The more the ability to transform this basic framework is reduced, the lower the capacity for societal self-transformation. While societal units which do not transform do survive as long as the range of tolerance of their basic knowledge and societal pattern allows for sufficient adaptation to environmental changes, such adaptation tends to become increasingly costly, and more so the more rapidly these changes occur.

In contrast, the controlling overlayer of more active units has a sublayer that can be activated to review and transform tabooed assumptions. A comparison of corporations which have shifted to a new line of products, restructured their internal organizations, and found new markets when their old markets were gradually lost with those which kept modifying their basic lines but not changing them although their profits greatly declined, suggests that the transforming corporations maintained R & D units which were exempt from the tabooed assumptions and were expected sporadically to review these assumptions. That is, part of their institutionalized role was to engage in "search" behavior precisely where the decision-making elites would otherwise settle for "satisficing" solutions.7

The societal parallel of this cybernetic arrangement is not difficult to point out. The intellectual community acts as a large-scale, societal R & D unit, as a critical examiner of tabooed assumptions. Under what economic, political, and sociological conditions intellectuals can fulfill this function and what, if any, functional alternatives exist are questions social scientists have much feeling about—but there is surprisingly little systematic research.8

These questions can be studied for any society and any societal unit. As the input of knowledge becomes a major guided societal activity (about three-quarters of the expenditure on R & D in the United States is federal) and as the ratio of this input as compared to other societal inputs increases both in relative expenditure and in socio-


8 For one of the few sociological studies, see Lewis Coser, Men of Ideas (New York: Free Press, 1965).
political significance, the macrosociological study of the organization of knowledge produc-
ton and consumption becomes an unavoidable part of studies of societal change and guidance. Typically, earlier studies of a society stressed the size of its population, territory, and gross national product; the present approach adds the number of Ph.D.'s a society's educational system "turns out," the size of its professional manpower, and its investment in R & D as indicators of a major societal variable. Sociology of knowledge traditionally focused on the social conditions under which true statements are made; macrosociology of knowledge focuses on the societal conditions under which knowledge is made available for societal purposes, adding a whole new field of inquiry to the study of societies.10

B. SOCIETAL DECISION-MAKING

At the head of the societal controlling overlayers are decision-making elites—the sociopolitical equivalent of the electronic centers. The elites choose between alternative policies, issue signals to the performing units (i.e., to the underlayer), and respond to signals fed back to the head from the performing units. (The body of the overlayer is made up of communication networks which tie elites to other member units and to a power hierarchy.) Sociologists have studied elites by asking how "closed" versus "open" they are to members of various societal units, how dispersed control is among them, and how they relate to each other. But these are not cybernetic considerations. They belong under the headings of consensus formation (e.g., closed and widely open elites are believed less effective for consensus formation than relatively open ones) and power relations (e.g., decentralization is believed more effective than monopolization of control by one elite or its fragmentation among several). Cybernetic aspects of elites have been studied largely by non-sociologists and have not been systematically related to societal analysis.11 The cybernetic study of elites concerns the consequences of differences in the procedures used by the various decision-making elites, the strategies employed, and the communication networks which lead from the elites to the performing units and back.

When elites engage in decision-making, they draw on an implicit or explicit societal theory of the nature of the relations among the units under control and how much and by what means these units can be guided by the elites.12 The validity of these theories varies from elite to elite; the greater the validity, the more effective one would expect the decision-making to be, which in turn is positively associated with the degree to which a societal unit is active. This proposition is not earthshaking, nor are many others concerning the conditions under which decision-making is effective. However, the inclusion or omission from a macrosociological theory of a set of propositions about the conditions under which decision-making is effective is indicative of one's position regarding the nature of society and of societal change.


In seeking to explain the action or change of a societal unit, most sociologists are more inclined to explore "background" conditions (e.g., the level of economic resources the unit commands; the educational opportunities of elite members) than to study the decision-making procedures the elites follow. There is a widely held assumption that such "background" factors constitute the basic substructure which both sets the main limits of variability of societal action and change (e.g., poor countries lack the capital needed to develop) and specifies the factors which determine what decisions will be made among whatever options are left open (e.g., because of the revolution of rising expectations, democratic elites cannot limit much the availability of consumer goods). Differences in decision-making procedures are considered either "dependent" variables or trivial. In contrast, the theory of societal guidance suggests that societal actors have more autonomy. "Background" factors are viewed as setting a broad frame; which course is followed within its limits is affected by cybernetic factors, among which decision-making procedures are a significant element. An effective elite, for instance, might defer consumption increase in a poor country despite rising expectations and tip the scales in favor of stable development.

Actually, many of the undeveloped nations are not overpopulated or poor in resources but poor in control capacities, among which the quality of their elites ranks high in importance. For instance, in 1930 the level of economic development of Canada and Argentina was similar, on several key indicators. Canada since then has continued to develop, while Argentina remains underdeveloped. A typical "background"-condition approach would stress the presence of the Protestant element in one country and its absence in the other, as well as the differences in the Catholic stock in the two countries (in Argentina it is more that of southern Spain and Italy, in Canada that of the French). One would expect, in line with Weber's analysis, these differences to correlate with attitudes favorable to capitalism.

Adding to this Weberian thesis, a theory of societal guidance would call attention to the difference between the responsive-democratic government of Canada and the authoritarian leadership of Argentina. True, this difference in leadership is in part due to differences in societal structure; Canada, for example, would not "tolerate" a Peron. But unless a one-to-one relationship between background factors and elite conduct is assumed, and elite conduct is viewed as having no significant independent effect on background factors, the analysis of the guiding quality of the elites has to be included as an integral part of societal theories. It suffices to contrast the development of each country under different governments following different decision-making procedures (e.g., Peron and Illia in Argentina) to illustrate the value of systematically including these factors.

One typical decision societal elites in charge of guided change often have to make, at what are relatively critical turning points, is between acceleration and deceleration of the processes of the change they guide. When a societal change is initiated —whether it be collectivization of farms, federation, or desegregation—resistance tends to accumulate, because existing patterns are supported by vested interests which are often threatened by the changes. As a change advances, there is in many cases at least one critical turning point at which resistance rises to a point where it endangers the control of the elites—a president thinks he might not be re-elected, the government believes it might be overthrown, or a part of the country might secede. The decision the elites then face is between acceleration, with the hope of "overpowering" the opposition and reaching a stage at which the support of those that will benefit from the new pattern will rise,

or deceleration to allow more time for the opposition to be worked out, circumvented, educated, or otherwise dealt with.

Obviously the question is not which procedure or strategy is in the abstract more effective; the question is rather under what societal conditions one is more effective than the other and under what conditions an elite chooses the suitable as against the unsuitable strategy. In a comparative study of four cases, we found two elites that accelerated and two that decelerated in face of a “premature” situation—that is, a situation where opposition was high and forces in support of the change weak. The accelerating elites lost control (in the United Arab Republic, Syria rebelled and seceded; the West Indian Federation was disbanded). The decelerating elites are still in control, though in one of the two cases (the Scandinavian system) the elite had decelerated so much that the process of change, regional unification, came to a standstill, while only in the fourth case (the European Economic Community) was continuation of the process assured by deceleration.14

Other societal decisions, often debated ideologically but rarely studied analytically and systematically, concern the conditions of militancy versus moderation, or confrontation versus coalition politics, and the wholistic versus the gradualist approach. These and similar strategic decisions draw on explicit or implicit theories about the nature of societal linkages and control factors, such as how far a government can be relied upon as an agent of transformation, what will be the result of mass activation of apathetic publics, or how much will activation of one societal sector “spill” over into the others. Here a main need is to link the study of societal decision-making with that of societal input of knowledge, two major control factors.

The quality of decision-making becomes more important the more active a societal unit is. Obviously the more assets a societal unit has and the more mobilized these are for societal action, the more advantages it can derive from their effective use. For passive units, which barely guide their own processes, “background” factors are of much importance; for units that react more creatively to environmental as well as to internal challenges, the quality of decision-making increases in significance. A theory, though, which stakes a claim for generality has to include systematically the variables to characterize societal decision-making even if in some societies they do not account for much of the variance.

Cybernetic factors other than the input of information and decision-making include various attributes of societal goals, such as the clarity of their formulation and the degree of compatibility of a unit's various goals. Also relevant is the quality of the communication networks that lead from the decision-making elites to the performance units and back, including the number and intensity of gaps, “noise” on the line, etc. As our purpose here is not to provide a list of these factors but to illustrate the main categories, we turn now to a third element of control, power.

C. POWER: ITS SOURCES AND ITS MOBILIZATION

Societal assets and power.—Societal structures are not just patterns of interaction of actors, patterns of expectations and symbols, but are also patterns of allocation of societal assets, of the possessions of a societal unit. These can be classified analytically as coercive, utilitarian, and normative, concerning, respectively, the distribution of the capacity to employ means of violence, material objects and services, and symbols (especially values). A measure of the assets a societal unit or subunit possesses is not in itself an indication of its power but only of its power potential. Assets may be used to generate more assets, may be consumed or stored, or may be used

to overcome the resistance of other actors, which is what is meant by societal power. (This does not mean necessarily to force other actors; their resistance may be overcome, for instance, by offering a payoff.) In exploring the relations between assets and power, it is essential not to shift the frame of reference in mid-analysis. Conversion of assets into power at one point in time might lead to more assets at a later point; in the first point in time, however, the generation of power entails a "loss" of assets.

A central proposition of the theory of societal guidance is that the relationship between assets and power is a "loose" one—that is, the amount of assets allocated to a societal unit in a given structure provides a poor indicator of how much societal power the unit will generate. The amount of power generated seems to be much affected by the *intra*-unit allocation of the assets among alternative usages. A unit poor in assets can in principle command more power than a much more affluent one, if the poor unit assigns more of its assets to power "production." (With half the gross national product, the U.S.S.R. maintains a defense budget similar to that of the United States.)

The fraction of the assets possessed by a unit that is converted into power is itself influenced by the societal context and not freely set by the societal actor (e.g., that Negro Americans are less politically active than Jewish Americans is in part due to differences in educational opportunities). We suggest, however, that the intra-unit assignment of assets to power is a relatively more malleable attribute than the amount of assets the unit possessed (at any given point in time). It is here that an important element of voluntarism enters the social structure. A comparison of colonial societies in the years immediately preceding the "takeoff" of national independence movements with those immediately after they won their independence seems to show that the "takeoff" involved more change in the distribution of assets, in their relative use for generating societal power, than in the size of the assets base itself. Similarly, the American civil rights movement, which between 1953 and 1965 transformed segments of the Negro Americans from a passive to an active grouping, entailed much more of a change in the mobilization of power than in the amount of assets this grouping commanded. The possession of assets rose slowly in comparison to the rise in political power.

*Mobilization.*—Each societal unit has at any given point in time a level of activation which we define as the amount of assets available for collective action as compared to its total assets. For example, the percentage of the gross national product spent by the government, the percentage of the labor force employed by it, and the percentage of the knowledge-producers who work for it are crude indicators of national activation level. *Mobilization* refers to an upward change in the level of activation, to an increase in the fraction of the total assets possessed by a unit made available for collective action by that unit. (Demobilization refers to a reduction in that level.)

The level of activation of most societal units most of the time is very low; if all their assets are taken into account, usually less than 15 per cent are available for collective action. Hence, relatively small percentage changes in the level of mobilization may increase the action capacity of a unit to a large extent. Major societal transformations, such as sociopolitical revolutions and the gaining of national independence, usually involve relatively high mobilization. The secret of the power of social movements lies in part in the relatively high mobilization which the asceticism and the intense commitment of the members allow for.

Aside from the asset base a collectivity commands and the amount of power it is mobilizing, the kind of power generated...
also affects the action capacity of the unit. To employ power is, by definition, to overcome resistance, but in society, as in nature, each application of power generates a counterpower, a resistance of its own (the result of the alienation of those who were made to suspend their preferences in favor of those of the power-wielders). While all power applications have this effect, some generate more alienation than others.

In estimating the effect of the use of a particular kind of power on the relationships between the power-wielders and the subjects, it is essential to take into account that this is as a rule a "generalized" relationship. That is, while a particular instance of exercise of power may generate little alienation, repeated use may generate much; and, even when no alienation is manifest, it may accumulate covertly and express itself indirectly.

We suggest that when different power relationships are compared, if the means of control used are coercive, all other things being equal, resistance will tend to be high; if utilitarian, lower; and if normative, even smaller. Most power-wielders may prefer to use the less alienating kinds, but there are limitations on their capacity to mobilize these kinds as well as on their understanding of the dynamics involved, with the consequence that they may opt to use a more alienating kind of power even where this is not otherwise necessary.

The societal-guidance approach thus adds to the exploration of the asset base of a unit the degree to which it is mobilized for collective action and which kinds of power are mobilized. These added factors, in turn, determine to a considerable degree how alienating societal control will be and whether relations between the elites and the other units will be those of open conflict, encapsulated conflict, or co-operation.

II. CONSENSUS FORMATION

A. CONSENSUS DEFINED

So far guidance of change has been explored from a "downward" view, from the controlling overlayer to the controlled underlayer; even the discussion of the concepts of communication feedback and subject resistance has been from the viewpoint of a controlling agent. The main difference, though, between societal guidance and electronic cybernetics is that in the societal realm we must systematically take into account that the controlled units have some of the controlling capacities themselves; they input knowledge, make decisions, pursue goals, and exercise power. Hence the capacity of any one unit to act is determined only in part by its ability to control the others. It is similarly affected by the degree to which the goals it has chosen to pursue and the means it employs are compatible with those preferred by other units—that is, the degree of consensus.

Consensus, the congruence of preferences of the units concerned, is viewed by typical sociological theories as largely given (or changing under the impact of ongoing processes); voluntaristic theories tend to view it as open to manipulation by charismatic leadership and/or mass media. From the viewpoint of a theory of societal guidance, consensus is the result of a process in which given preferences and guided efforts affect each other, the outcome of which tends to be in continual flux. Consensus needs to be continuously revised as new groups rise and the relations among old ones, as well as their preferences, change. A consensus that becomes institutionalized and loses the capacity to adapt and transform is hence likely to become increasingly inauthentic, representing yesterday's society but unresponsive to the contemporary, changing one. In the following discussion, unless specifically so indicated, the consensus referred to is dynamic, authentic, and responsive.
B. CONTROL AND CONSENSUS

There is a trade-off curve between control and consensus; that is, for any given level of activation, the more consensus, the less need for control, and the less consensus, the more need for control if the same level of realization of goals is to be maintained. Which "mix" is used, though, is not without consequences; it affects the levels of alienation and resistance and hence the future capacity to act. Of course, when both consensus and control are higher, more change can be guided than when both are lower, without an increase in alienation. The additional consensus absorbs the additional alienation which the additional control would otherwise have generated by allowing greater reliance on the less alienating kinds of power or by achieving action in unison without that power being exercised.

C. CONSENSUS-FORMATION STRUCTURES

To illustrate a societal-guidance approach to the study of consensus formation, we briefly compare "built-in" to "segregated" consensus-formation structures. In a built-in structure, consensus formation is by and large the output of ongoing interactions among the societal units. Consensus formation in smaller and less complex preliterate tribes seems to rely largely on ongoing interaction between the member families. In the Soviet society, consensus is to a degree built-in, as it is produced in the process of interaction among factory management, union leaders, and party officials, the prime function of which is not consensus formation but economic and administrative in nature (in the downward, control sense of the term).18 In a segregated structure, political units (such as parties and legislatures) exist as distinct from societal ones, and societal differences are translated into political ones before consensus is worked out. Segregated structures seem more effective for consensus formation than built-in ones, though, we suggest, they generate only enough consensus to back up comparatively low levels of activation. They are like a sophisticated machine which, however efficient, cannot be used for heavy duty.

In the search for a structure that would allow for more direction of change and higher consensus (a search that is far from completed), "voluntary planning" as developed in France in the postwar years and by the European Economic Community has gained much attention. There is here less differentiation of political and societal units than in the segregated structures typical of traditional democracies but more than in the built-in structures of totalitarian regimes. Here, knowledge-input units are not only related to the societal decision-making units but also are tied into the consensus-forming process, thus informing the controlled and not just the controlling units and remodeling the judgments that the information units produce on the basis of interaction with both the elites and the publics.

Comparative studies of the organization and process of consensus formation ought to supplement and in part replace the comparative study of constitutions and formal governmental organization—to supplement, because we need studies of both political institutions and consensus formation, studies which will relate these institutions to societal groupings and the relations among them; to replace in part, because the studies of political shells have proved too rigid and simplistic for many purposes. The study of the prerequisites of democracy may illustrate this point.

As democracy was traditionally defined—the rule of the majority—the concept was unable even to distinguish between totalitarian and democratic regimes. The more subtle definition—provision for the institutionalized change of the party in office—still disregarded less formal demo-

ocratic mechanisms, such as changes in the coalition partners and in the factions represented inside the ruling party in response to changes in societal power, and defined countries such as West Germany and Israel as non-democratic. Neither the Christian Democratic Union nor Mapai has been voted out of office since the establishment of the two states, and whether or not these parties can be electorally defeated is an open question. Also, formal studies focus on national legislators and parties as the consensus-formation agents, but these are rapidly losing their effectiveness as the power of the executive rises. Hence, a polity that meets all the criteria of formal democracy may not generate enough consensus for the prevailing level of activation, not to mention increased levels which seem to be both needed and occurring, thus leaving the society with substandard consensus leading either to accumulative alienation or pressure to reduce activation (a stand taken by U.S. conservatives).19

Similarly, significant differences in the consensus formation of various totalitarian societies and of various authoritarian ones (a mode of government which prevails in Africa, Asia, and Latin America), as well as the changes of these regimes over time, can scarcely be studied in formal terms, such as merely characterizing them as totalitarian or authoritarian or classifying regimes as one-, two-, or multiparty states. In comparison, a societal-governance approach to the study of consensus formation, illustrated by the differences between built-in and segregated structures, adds a more processual and dynamic perspective.

III. A SYNTHESIZING VIEW: THE ACTIVE SOCIETY

A. A TYPOLOGY OF SOCIETIES

We turn now to illustrate a synthesizing perspective on social processes that may be attained once our understanding of the various components of societal guidance is more advanced; at the present stage, little more than a brief illustration can be provided. Using control and consensus formation as two dimensions of a property space, we characterize, in an ideal-typical manner, a society which is high on both as comparatively active, low on both as passive, high on control but low on consensus as overmanaged, and low on control but high on consensus as drifting.

The passive society is approximated by those primitive societies whose polities are highly undeveloped, especially "segmental" tribes.20 Their low level of societal self-control is obvious. Consensus seems to be not only largely static but also hardly mobilizable for most societal goals. Typically, there is little machinery to form consensus if additional consensus were necessary, let us say, because of an external challenge. Hence, while "background" consensus may be quite high, the consensus-formation capacity is low. One indicator of this low capacity is that, when primitive societies do act, coercion often plays a rather central role in overcoming internal resistance.21

The active society maintains a level of control that is not lower and is possibly even higher than that of overmanaged societies, and it forms at least as much consensus as drifting societies. This is possible because the active society commands both more effective control and more effective

19 It should be noted that we assume here that not only those classes which favor radical change yet are suppressed may be alienated, but also those classes which favor the status quo and are forced to accept a radical change. The alienation of these classes is reduced the more they realize (or are socialized to see) the legitimacy and "payoffs" of the changes, which, by and large, can only be established if the changes are responsive to the deeper needs of these classes as well, and if they are expressive of basic societal and human values. This matter is further explored in my The Active Society, chap. xxi.


consensus-formation mechanisms since it can rely more heavily on the less alienating kinds of power, especially on the normative one. Also, a high level of consensus formation can be achieved only at a high level of activation, because only under this condition can a large number and variety of goals (the various subsocieties and the society as a unit are committed to) be realized. This realization cannot be achieved by mere increase of societal control, as effective control requires the support of those subject to it. And, if the level of control is to be raised without at the same time raising alienation, a high capacity to form consensus is required. Thus, high control and high consensus, high activation and low alienation, are mutually reinforcing.

Finally, the active society has the highest capacity of the four ideal types for self-transformation, which is the most effective mechanism to avoid widespread alienation, because it makes it possible for the rise of radically different goals and subsocieties to be accommodated by the same system since it changes its basic pattern. If the societal pattern is responsive to these changing goals of the members, the membership will tend to be committed rather than alienated, and the society will be active.

The active society is a utopia in that it exists nowhere but is a not a utopia in the sense that it is possible for a society to become one, for its functional requirements do not appear to violate any sociological law. Social-movement societies, such as Israel in 1948, approximate such an active society. A main difference between a social-movement society and the active one is that the latter stabilizes some social-movement features such as high consensus formation and intense commitment, rather than merely passing through such a phase.

For an active society to be possible, consensus formation must be in part upward, allowing for the authentic expression of the members' preferences and for a real, and not "co-opted," participation. It is a central proposition of the theory of societal guidance that downward mobilization of consensus cannot effectively replace the upward elements; commitment achieved through mobilization of the sources of information and mass propaganda is short-lived and not nearly as effective as authentic, upward consensus formation, even while its spell lasts. The tenor of most of the literature on the subject assumes the opposite position, but we are not aware of any body of evidence which would allow this rather central question to be settled. The reasons in support of our position will be presented in a future publication.

The overmanaged, high-control, low-consensus type is approximated by the totalitarian societies. Typically, they have inadequate consensus-formation structures, and those they have are mainly of the built-in variety. Societal action is initially oriented to goals which assume a very high capacity to act, but those are later scaled down, as consensus mechanisms do not allow discovering beforehand where and how much resistance will be encountering in the various subsocieties as various societal changes are attempted. Typically, too, use of the most alienating kind of power, coercion, is high. (While the use of normative power is also high, its being "mixed" with coercive power undermines its effectiveness.)

Whether or not overmanaged societies are transformable and what kinds of societies they will become if they are, are two widely debated questions. The discussion is between those who see democratization as taking place and those who argue that the

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22 While initially totalitarian societies were viewed as effective "brainwashers," now it is increasingly evident that "human nature" reasserts itself, especially in the U.S.S.R. and eastern Europe, and probably in China too.

23 Etzioni, The Active Society, chap. xxi.

24 For additional discussion of the difference between "pure" application of normative power and its "mixing" with other kinds of power, see my A Comparative Analysis . . . , pp. 55 ff.
totalitarian societies are ultra-stable. This dichotomy seems not to exhaust the possibilities. Democratization seems unlikely, because democracies are themselves no longer well adapted since their present control and consensus mechanisms are insufficient for the higher level of activation needed and because there is no legitimation of democracy and no democratic experience in the history of most contemporary totalitarian societies. On the other hand, it seems hard to maintain that totalitarian societies are not transformable in view of the far-reaching societal changes in the U.S.S.R. since 1917.

The direction of any such change might be toward an active society whose level of control is relatively closer to that of totalitarian societies than that of the democratic ones; whose less segregated consensus-formation structure is closer to the totalitarian built-in one than the democratic segregated one, and whose social-movement character can draw for legitimation on the most charismatic period of the totalitarian societies. The sharpest transition would be from reliance on force and propaganda as central means of compliance to a focus on education and utilitarian power; such a transformation, as drastic as it is, is more limited than a shift to a relatively pure utilitarian focus characteristic of capitalist democracies. In fact, this seems to be a direction of change already evidenced in the U.S.S.R.

Drifting societies are approximated by capitalist democracies. Their most important relevant feature is that they tend to act to introduce significant structural changes only when the need to act is "overdue," in a "crisis," only when broad consensus can be mobilized before action is taken. Further, the action taken often does not remove the lag, as the changes introduced are an accommodation of the more conservative to the more change-oriented subsocieties. The second major reason capitalist democracies are drifting societies is that the more powerful subsocieties draw societal assets for their own consumption and power either by neutralizing the societal controls which might have prevented such a deflection or by slanting these controls to serve their subsocietal interests. In either case, as far as the society at large is concerned, it is ineffectual in guiding its processes and change.

B. CONSENSUS, EQUALITY, AND ACTIVATION

Here an additional concept must be introduced to tie the analysis of consensus formation to the study of assets and alienation, the concept of equality. Equality is used here to refer to an allocative pattern indicated by a distribution profile that approximates a straight line; that is, groupings of the population that are equal in size possess equal amounts of assets. No society is completely egalitarian, but there are obviously significant differences in the degrees of inequality. These, in turn, are associated, though, of course, not on a one-to-one basis, with differences in power. When consensus is formed, it reflects the power relations among the members; the policy agreed upon tends to be closer to that preferred by the more powerful subsocieties. It is as though the weaker members say to themselves that they had better go along with a suggested policy, in which their concurrence is traded for some concessions, for fear that otherwise the powerful would impose a policy even more removed from their preferences. The amount of alienation that remains in the weaker units, however, is related to the measure of inequality. Consensus which leaves little alienation can be formed only under conditions of fairly high equality.


28 On this concept see my Political Unification, pp. 81–82, 95.
While this cannot be demonstrated here, we suggest that there is a secular historical trend toward a reduction in inequality among the subsocieties (e.g., classes, regions) making up the capitalistic democracies, although so far this reduction has been limited. (The trend is fairly obvious as far as political rights and status symbols are concerned; it is less clear with regard to economic well-being.) Continuation and acceleration of such a trend, if they were to take place, would move democratic societies in an active direction by allowing the formation of more consensus with less alienating undertones and more facing of societal problems as they arise. A major force which propels the transition from a drifting toward an active society is the mobilization of the weaker collectivities; this is triggered by the spread of education, changes in employment opportunities, and other factors that generate imbalanced status sets, as well as by the priming effect of some elites, especially intellectual ones. Since this statement is rather central to our conception of societal change as far as the transition of Western societies into the postmodern (see below for definition) period is concerned, the assumptions implied should be briefly outlined.

As we see it, transformation of capitalist democracies is not propelled by conflict among classes but by interaction among organized collectivities. Thus, the collectivities involved may be ethnic groups or regional communities and not just classes, and the relationship among the subsocieties might be of coalition, limited adversary, etc., and not necessarily all-out conflict. Above all, the units of action are not the collectivities per se but that part of each which has been mobilized by organizations. Thus, history is not affected by the working class as such, which is a passive unit, but by labor unions, labor parties, social-protest movements that mobilize a segment of the working class. (The same could be said about the civil rights movement and Negro Americans, national-independence movements and colonial people, etc.)

Collectivities are bases of potential power, but generally only a small fraction of these potentialities are actualized for purposes of societal action and change. The capacity of any collectivity to influence the pattern of societal change, its actual societal power, depends as much on its capacity to mobilize—that is, on the outcome of the internal struggle between mobilizers and the immobilized—as on the collectivity's potential power base.

It may be said that the capacity to mobilize is itself determined by the distribution of assets among the collectivities, that the more powerful units hold down the capacity to mobilize of the weaker societal units. While this is a valid observation, it is also true that the mobilization of any collectivity reduces the capacity of other collectivities to hold it down. For each point in time, hence, it is necessary to study not only the power potential of a societal actor but also his mobilization capacity, which affects his actual power at this point in time. The dynamic analysis then proceeds by comparing changes in potential and actual power over time and the effects of changes in the power of some actors over that of the others. A study of societal change which focuses largely on the stratification relations among collectivities (as Marx tended to do and as his theory was corrected to a degree by Lenin), not to mention one which excludes power analysis altogether, provides at best a fragmental theory of societal change.

What does all this imply for the transformation of capitalistic democracies? In these societies, most members of most collectivities have a formal right to participate in the political process, an egalitarian political institutional status unmatched in their societal positions. An increasing number are also gaining an education, which

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has a mobilizing effect.\(^2\) For historical reasons which need not be explored here, campus groups, professionals, clergy, middle-class members of ethnic minorities, all of which command mobilizing skills, are allowed to exercise them and serve as mobilizers of the weaker collectivities, within the limits set by various constraints. And, as at the same time weaker collectivities are becoming increasingly mobilizable and the number of mobilizers is increasing, the total effect is increased societal power of the heretofore weaker (and underprivileged) collectivities. The effect of the mobilization of weaker collectivities, which is only in part neutralized by countermobilization of more powerful collectivities, is to transform the society in the direction of a relatively more egalitarian and active one. Whether such transformation will sooner or later lead to a showdown between the powerful and the mobilizing collectivities, or whether the mobilization will run out of steam on its own, or whether the scales will be tipped for an active society—that is, whether a structural transformation will take place—are questions our study of societal guidance points to but cannot at present answer.

\(^2\) For a review of several studies which show correlations between education and political activation, see Lester W. Milbrath, *Political Participation* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1965), pp. 42–54.

We can conclude, however, that at least at the present both overmanaged and drifting societies seem to be leaning in the direction of an active society, rather than either of these two less active societies becoming the prevalent type. The new means of communication and of knowledge technology seem to be working in this direction in both kinds of societies; continued mobilization of the weaker collectivities in capitalist societies and increased pluralism in totalitarian societies may also be supportive of such a transformation. The new cybernetic capacities that are increasingly available to societies since 1945 offer a new range of societal options and hence mark a period that may be referred to as the postmodern one. And 1945 also marks the opening of the atomic age and hence suggests that a major issue for macrosociology, not touched upon here, is that of changing, not the systems' structures, but their boundaries. Answering the question as to which conditions favor and which block the rise of active societies and the transformation of an anarchic world into a communal one seems to us to require a macrosociology on top of prevailing "universal" theories; a theory of societal guidance may provide a systematic sociological framework for such an approach. It may also provide an avenue to carry the sociologists' contributions to these societal transformations.

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