Societal Guidance:
A Perspective on Society*

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DURING the next twenty years, the United States will be brought, in one way or another, to attend more fully to its mounting social problems. Once the terrible war in Vietnam is terminated, the feeble attempt to move forward on the domestic front will, we must hope, acquire some vigor. The revived national attempts to change actual relations among status groups, to re-allocate wealth and educational opportunities, to reconstruct the cities and other such efforts, will depend on the images society has of itself. Leaders and citizens hold to a variety of views of what the society is like, why it is the way it is, and how it may be changed. The social sciences constitute one important factor which affects these self-views, self-analyses, and prescriptions for action.

Sociology developed during a period in which the need for its services was less marked than it will be in the near future, and when it was less able to fulfill what was required of it. Society at that time was less self-conscious, and self-directed action was less legitimate. Now, as its qualities are becoming more manifest, the demand for a sociology able to assist society in its efforts is on the rise.

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I would like to consider the question of what kind of sociology will be best able to meet these demands, what kind of sociology will be able to assist society in its transformation. Two preliminary comments are necessary: (a) I deal here only with the benefits a revised sociological analysis may offer, and not with the role of other branches of sociology, such as methodology or applied research; and (b) while I shall focus on the new attributes which I hold that sociological analysis ought to acquire, I do not share the view that previous work in the field was either wasted or misdirected. On the contrary, I see much in it that is valuable, that can be built upon. C. Wright Mills on occasion suggested that theory and methodology have become a fetish, a barrier between the sociologist and the societal reality he seeks to study. At other times, however, he himself drew on these conceptual and methodological tools (as in his *Puerto Rican Journey* and *White-Collar*). He suggested that these tools ought to be used to enrich and revise—which, after all, is the essence of the scientific enterprise—but not that we require a whole new and different undertaking.

If sociological analysis is to become more relevant for societal self-evaluation and action, it requires the addition of a sub-theory; this sub-theory would deal with those attributes of societies which do not manifest themselves, or manifest themselves only in rudimentary ways, on other levels. Second, a theory must be not only valid and internally consistent but sufficiently encompassing as well. For example, modern economic theory, which is probably the most validated and formalized social science, is applicable only to a limited context; it deals mainly with relatively free market systems; it does not provide an adequate explanation of economic growth; and above all, it cannot account for economic development. Similarly, some decision-making theories have effectively withstood all empirical tests and are consistent to the degree that they are given mathematical formalization, but their scope is quite limited. As their creators themselves recognize, one may use these theories only in cases of routine decisions, where no more than two actors are involved, and under conditions of full information. Thus, empirical validity and internal consistency are not sufficient; a theory must cover the subject area it seeks to understand. In sociology, in the study of society, the analysis must include the study of the analytic dimensions of the main
societal issues of the age; if these are neglected, sociology may be valid and consistent, but it will be manifestly irrelevant.

Finally, an adequate sociological theory must be able to provide a critical perspective without losing its objective base. The critical perspective is necessary because the society, which is using sociology in its self-analysis, is obviously far from a good society, let alone a "Great" one. Whatever slant sociology brings to this self-analysis—whether it be a conservative reaffirmation of the status quo, the neutrality of a withdrawing position, or the reinforcement of the urge to transcend—will have a significant effect upon the extent and duration of the existing societal distortions. At the same time, an objective base must be maintained; without a shared basis on which a community of sociologists can draw, there will be as many sociologies as there are ideological positions, and sociology will lose its distinctive value as a scholarly perspective. In this age, it should not be surprising that one who is objective will be critical.

An objective base for a critical posture can be found in the values and needs of those subject to sociological study. Gunnar Myrdal illustrates this approach in his American Dilemma, in which he points out that Americans are not living up to their standard of equality, not to his personal standard or a Swedish one. Similarly, I am not imposing my standards on the Soviet Union when I note that Soviet citizens are not extended the freedoms of worship, association and expression to which their constitution entitles them.

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The central conceptual distinction we build upon is that between active societal units and passive ones. Active units are able to know themselves; they are able to commit themselves to the development of new structures and new boundaries (if such a transformation is required to realize their values); to respond to their members' needs; and to gain the broad-based and authentic support of their membership for such a transformation. In passive units, self-knowledge is less productive; they are unable to change themselves; and their membership is largely suppressed or apathetic. The passive-active distinction cuts across the usual static-dynamic, stability-change, or Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft dichotomies, which have dominated sociological analysis for generations. A
dynamic (or changing) unit may be passive if the changes within it are "ongoing" from the viewpoint of the unit under study—that is, if they are determined by technological processes, environmental pressures, or the domination of other societal units. A stable unit may be active if its structure is responsive to its members and if it has built-in (that is, institutionalized) mechanisms for fundamental change. Thus, the key distinction here is between guiding processes (the societal overlayer) and guided processes (the societal underlayer). Societal guidance, it should be stressed, includes not only downward flows of directives, guidelines, and communications (that is, control systems) but also upward flows of directives, guidelines, and communications as well as "horizontal" flows among the members, the bases of consensus-formation. Thus, control in conjunction with consensus makes for societal guidance.

When control is stressed and consensus-formation is lacking, we find an over-managed society, a model approximated by some totalitarian societies. When consensus is stressed and control is neglected, we find drifting societies (for example, some preliterate tribes); or societies controlled by outsiders (colonial societies); or those controlled by a few of their members (monopolized societies, approximated by capitalistic democracies). Only societies which combine effective mechanisms for control and for consensus-formation may become—if they meet additional requirements—active societies. Examples of semi-active societies include Israel and the Scandinavian countries. A fully active society is a utopia in the sense that it does not exist at the present time, but not in the sense that it cannot be created. This picture is incomplete, in that for a society to be active, its consensus-formation must be authentic, truly committing the members; otherwise it will be unable to sustain the required level of activeness.

The prevailing sociological theories tend to focus on the societal underlayer, dealing with the interdependence of societal parts, the sources of societal "stickiness" (the well-known studies of resistance to change) and unguided changes (for example, differentiation processes, according to which societies first split two ways, then four ways, without their having any say in the matter). Political scientists are often primarily concerned with the overlayer—in particular, the state—which is the seat of societal decision-making.
control, and consensus-mobilization. The theory of societal guidance, which we tentatively outline here, combines elements of both traditions: it studies the attributes of the societal underlayers, of the political overlayers, and especially their relations to each other, in order to explore the conditions under which a greater measure of activeness is found and the means by which the process of activation may be advanced.

A significant set of elements of the theory of societal guidance consists of the variables which characterize the societal production and input of knowledge. These concern the capacity of a society to collect information about itself, to analyze it, and to transmit the knowledge thus gained to those in power, as well as to the membership-at-large. In the study of societal knowledge processes, several questions arise which still require much empirical research and analysis. For example: What is the optimal investment in knowledge? What proportion of the resources available to a society should be invested in formation-collection without, in so doing, undermining other societal needs? To what degree can and should the production and processing of knowledge be separated from normative evaluations? Which societal sub-units are best assigned to the collection, and which to the processing, of information? How are these units to be related to each other, to the societal elites, and to the publics? Can the members of society be expected to absorb the masses of new information modern societal guidance provides? If not, how can their authentic participation in consensus-building be provided for?

We would like to emphasize at this point that these questions, the basis of a new approach to the sociology of knowledge (questions often discussed in ideological terms) are open to empirical research. Thus, for example, Andrew Shoenfeld, in his book Modern Capitalism, was able to compare the British and the French knowledge-systems and their effects on the economic growth of their respective countries. He showed that formerly France had, as compared with Britain, an overly centralized, overextended and even overly sophisticated system, a system which had the effect of retarding French economic growth. He indicated, however, that recent changes in the economies of the two countries, and improvements in the technology of knowledge and communica-
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tion have reversed the picture, giving the French an advantage over the British. At present, French society has, so to speak, "caught up" with its knowledge system, while the British have remained saddled with an obsolescent one, the same system which they had benefited from in earlier generations.

Similarly, we were able to draw several tentative conclusions about communication of knowledge from elites to the publics, from a case study of President Kennedy's attempt to move towards a strategy of peace. This suggested that although public sharing of all societal knowledge is not feasible and not a necessary prerequisite of democracy, sharing of contextual knowledge is both possible and necessary. The public's mind—or at least the mind of the politically aware and the politically active citizens—seems to be composed like a series of "boxes" (or contexts). As long as policy stays within the confines of these boxes, the publics remain relatively unconcerned, uninformed and tolerant of elite guidance. At times, however, decision-makers violate these contexts, policy goes beyond the established bounds, and a fundamental change is initiated without authentic consent having been first formed to endorse it. Then, the lack of consensus and its various ramifications manifest themselves rapidly: presidents lose public support, and, ultimately, elections; governments are overthrown; productivity declines and sabotage increases. Thus, it seems that at least basic policy changes require public education and consent.

The second set of elements of a societal guidance theory concerns the way in which societies specify their collective commitments, the variables which characterize societal decision-making. When we ask what constitutes a societal system, we may answer in terms of transactional ties (a system would be defined here as a higher level of exchanges among members as compared with non-members) or integrative bonds (shared values and cohesive relations); but when we ask what makes a societal unit capable of action, we assume, in addition, some capacity to formulate collectively a line of action and to implement it. The key variables which characterize such a capacity are: (a) How centralized or dispersed is the decision-making capacity? Pluralistic systems, for example, reach decisions in the political equivalent of a marketplace, a political give-and-take among the members. Monolithic
systems, on the other hand, reach decisions in a more centralized fashion, like a business organization operating on a country-wide scale. (b) What are the rate and cost of implementing societal decisions in these alternative ways? It is often said—although this remains to be demonstrated—that while monolithic systems are able to make decisions more rapidly than pluralistic systems, they do not necessarily implement more of their decisions than do pluralistic societies, and those which are implemented often exact a higher economic and human cost. Here, the sequential relations between policy and action are especially significant. Pluralistic systems tend to form consensus first and then to act upon it; they are frequently passive, slow in responding to new member needs and in transforming themselves. Monolithic systems frequently begin by launching an action and then discover whether it does or does not have the required public support: if public support is found lacking, the plan is often down-scaled after it has been launched, as China adjusted its various "Great Leaps" when societal resistance became manifest. This post hoc adjustment accounts, in part, for the high cost of implementation in this decision-making approach. Obviously, an active society, which (by definition) is much more able to marshal consensus, would be capable of more collective action without generating such extensive costs, resistance, and hence alienation.

A related but independent factor is the degree to which the decision-making units attempt to project themselves into the future. For example, incrementalism is a decision-making strategy that stresses the short-run by focusing on actors who move only a small step at a time, from established patterns and well-trodden pathways. It has often been advocated as the "intelligence of democracy" on the grounds that more encompassing and longer-run planning is neither feasible nor ethical. Not feasible, because man does not command the necessary information or the capacity for calculation which a longer perspective requires; not ethical, because systematic planning tends to drown out many of the various needs and interests scattered throughout society. Being systematic requires coercion, violating the rights of others. Other analysts, however, have argued that the incremental approach, at best, reforms but never transforms a society, thus providing for a conservative—or, at best, liberal—perspective.
The questions of how various societal actors actually make their decisions and what effects the decision-making procedures they follow have, remain to be studied; above all, the conditions required for the implementation of a decision-making strategy that is transforming but not unrealistic in its demands, seem as of now unknown.

A third element which a theory of societal guidance must systematically include is that of power. Classes, races, and societies relate to each other not only in terms of shared values or instrumental needs but also in terms of subordination and conflict, coalitions and confrontations. The systematic inclusion of the category of power in sociological analysis is unavoidable, as it significantly affects—and is affected by—all other major societal variables.

Power relations between the societal overlayers and underlayers influence the quality of the political system. The more the overlayers dominate the member units, the more the society moves toward totalitarianism. The more the members neutralize the overlayers, the more anarchic the society becomes. A balance of power between the members and the overlayers (but not sheer pluralism) seems to be the condition most suitable for a democratic polity. The power of the members assures the existence of units with sufficient autonomy to continue the political give-and-take and provides the power base for a system in which a plurality of needs and values is represented. The strength of the overlayers assures that no one member will be able to dominate the others, that some universal norms will be upheld for all members, and above all, that conflict among the members will be limited to nonviolent means.

The second power-dimension pertains to relations among member units rather than to those between the underlayers and the overlayers. Here, the more unequal the distribution of power, the more skewed the pattern of societal stratification—the lower the chances for authentic consensus-formation, and hence, for an active society. Consensus reached among actors who differ significantly in their power inevitably reflects more the needs of the mighty than those of the weak. As a result, a situation is created which is particularly conducive to the generation of inauthentic consensus; it is as if the weaker members feel compelled to con-
sent to the policy advocated by the more powerful, lest an even more distasteful policy be imposed on them. Consensus generated in this manner, however, does not effectively commit members to the course of action to be followed. The underlying inequality which characterizes consensus-democracies is largely responsible for their inability to sustain the support of many of their members, especially the young and the intellectuals, and therefore actively to attack most societal problems. Only consensus formed under conditions of substantial equality can authentically reflect and respond to the membership-at-large and can serve as the basis for an active society.

We should like to reemphasize at this point that all these propositions are subject to empirical testing. For instance, the effects of consensus that is not committing may be found in the high incidence of deviance and the underlying tension which accompany, precede, and follow conforming behavior. No wonder the societies commit more men to prisons and mental hospitals than are found in their colleges or are active politically. Studies could trace the effects of participation in an activity to which one is not authentically committed. While we cannot outline here the various measurements involved, we do hold that theory ought to be formulated in such a way that its hypotheses can be tested and we hold that all those submitted here are capable of such verification.

To return to our attempt at theory-building, we ask: how can transformation toward an active society be systematically proposed for a society which has an unequal power structure, one whose society-wide overlayers are ineffectual or monopolized by a few elites? Do not the very power differentials which keep some societal groupings subordinate and underprivileged also prevent their mobilization and action, on the side of societal transformation? The answer hinges on an essential attribute of the relations between the stratification (or asset) base of a societal grouping, and its capacity to act and influence the societal and political structure. The relationship between the base and the capacity to act is a loose one, depending on the proportion of the assets a grouping commands which it invests in societal action as compared with other factors (especially consumption and reinvestment). A grouping with fewer assets may in fact generate more power than one with more, if it commits a greater proportion to action pur-
poses. This is essentially the way new social movements—ranging from organized labor to national independence movements—gain societal momentum, change structures and boundaries. Hence, next to the Marxist proposition about the central role played by conflicts among classes (or collectivities) in the transformation of societies (that is, history), we place the theorem that of equal importance is the struggle within each collectivity between the mobilizers and the un mobilized, between the leading and the apathetic members, between the active and the passive. The patterns of society and its historical transformations, we hold, are as much affected by these intra-collectivity struggles as by those among collectivities.

For reasons we cannot explore here, the historical trends in the West seem to point toward a relative rise in the number and power of mobilizers among the weak and underprivileged collectivities. Whether or not this will result in a gradual transformation of Western societies into active ones or a sharp confrontation between the powerful and the underprivileged collectivities is difficult to foresee. One thing seems certain: with the rise of education, the spread of political consciousness and organizational skills among the lower collectivities, the dominating collectivities will be faced with the choice of responding to the needs of the mobilizing collectivities, or being overcome by them. As Franz Schurmann pointed out, whether a social movement now developing within the U. S. will be reformist or revolutionary depends not so much on its members—on their psychology or ideology—as it does on the kind of reception the established collectivities will give to their rising voice, claims, and power.

Sociological analysis, of the kind we could illustrate here in a very limited way only, will assist in moving toward a society more able to realize its values and one more responsive to its members’ needs. The more sociological theory analyzes the qualities and conditions of activation, the more it will facilitate the transformation towards an active society. A sociology which is concerned with macro-emergent properties, with its relevance to the problems of the age, and the potency of its critical stance, a sociology which includes a systematic study of the way societies learn, decide and act—and the way societal efforts and authentic consensus-formation are linked—will be both a more valid sociology and one that will serve to bring about a more valid society.