SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON STRATEGY

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Strategy sets forth principles for the selection and employment of resources and power in the pursuit of given goals, and also specifies priorities among these goals. However, it does not formulate the goals themselves.

In contrast with terms such as orientation and perspective, it is self-conscious and articulated. It is similar to policy; in fact these terms are often used interchangeably, but policy deals more with the setting of goals and is less articulated than strategy. Typically, one talks of foreign policy but of military strategy because the former is less subject to explicit and specific criteria of operation than the latter. With the increased mobilization of society and the increased sophistication of policy making, it is becoming more common to talk about strategic goals of foreign affairs (and even of corporations, advertising, and major scientific research undertakings such as the lunar exploration).

STRATEGY FORMATION AS A SOCIOLOGICAL PROCESS

One sociological perspective on strategy sees it as a social process, as a study of the actors who formulate it in interaction with each other. Strategy is often viewed as a mode of thinking, and thinking, it has often been stressed, inevitably occurs in individual minds. Hence, it might be argued that strategy is free from, or will escape, sociological imperialism. But this viewpoint is based on an optical illusion: it sees individuals as biological units, and therefore tends to view what they think and say as «individual». Actually, their thought is governed by sociological forces as much as their behavior. Due to language and culture-bound assumptions, thought does not take place in a vacuum. The formulation of strategy is no exception.

Nor is the formulation of strategy a pure thought process. Suggestions concerning strategies are manifold, but, like other «free-floating» ideas, they become subject for sociological study chiefly when they gain some degree of following. Only a small fraction of
all strategies initiated gains such a following. Sociologists might explore the generic ways in which strategies that gain a following differ from those that do not.

Here the relationships among those who formulate a strategy, those who approve it and those who implement it is of interest. Unlike most systems of thought, strategies tend to be produced for a specific client, often a military, political, or corporate decision-maker. Very few strategies are advanced without considerable interaction between the «producers» and their prospective clients. Usually there is a deep sharing of assumptions and concepts between the strategist and his organizational client. On the basis of this common orientation, the strategist formulates a new strategy or sub-strategy, as when a politician's «brain-trust» works out a «line» for the next election, or the U.S. Air Force requests the Rand Corporation to work out a new strategy in which missiles will replace bombers. For a different client, with different assumptions, the same strategist and strategy would be of little use. Thus, the relations between producers and consumers of strategic thought are very particularistic.

Far from being a rational process that responds only to empirical evidence and follows clear rules of derivation or logic, the formation of strategy — and its initiation — involves a bargaining process which take place among the various interests that are concerned with its implementation (or the prevention of its implementation). Few, if any, intellectual processes are freed from such divisive forces, especially if they concern applied matters and include normative considerations as do strategies. Since they also deal with the future and are, as a rule, on a fairly general level, it is not surprising that strategies are highly extra-empirical. This means that, with few exceptions, no decisive «reality test» is applicable. The advocates of a strategy that relies heavily on air power rather than counter-insurgency, on advertising rather than product quality, etc., can often do as well by using persuasive arguments as by collecting compelling evidence. Nor can the two be as easily separated as is sometimes assumed.

There are several studies which follow this general line of analysis and provide a basis for the study of strategy as a social process. They try to determine the direction and relative influence of the interaction which occurs during the formulation of various elements of a strategy. What interests came into play and to what degree were they able to slant the strategy in their direction? Who endorsed the strategy and to what degree was it implemented? Typically, few of
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Sociological Models as Bases of Strategic Thought

A not unrelated, but in many ways quite different, sociological
approach to the study of strategy seeks theoretical elements which
could serve as a basis of strategic thought, disregarding both the ac-
tors who formulate it and the relations between strategists and their
clients. Since most strategies deal with social factors and systems,
whether the electorate, the consumer market, or an alien society, one
might ask: What kinds of sociological theory can serve strategies
best? This is not a test of the empirical validity of a theory, but of
its practical utility; i.e., which strategy in terms of whatever theory
lies behind it, works best? Moreover, the applied test is of a special
nature, because it is comparatively generalized. Unlike tactics, strate-
gies deal with general approaches to the pursuit of one or more goals
over relatively long periods of time. Thus, the test is not the suc-
cess of a weapons system, but the winning of a campaign, or a war;
it is not gaining the votes of some group within the electorate, but
winning the election, etc.

These two characteristics of strategy, its applied and general nature,
make its testing difficult. The applied quality puts strong demands
on most theories that are analytical rather than synthesizing because
application requires synthesis. And, since empirical tests tend to be
limited in scope and the transition from limited to general tests is
at best risky, the generic conditions of a test are hard to satisfy.

Among the main dimensions along which sociological theories can
be ordered according to their utility in the formulation of strategies,
the following are especially valuable: (a) They can be either nor-
mative or descriptive. While all strategies contain both evaluative
and factual statements, they differ in the degree to which they stress
one rather than the other. Theories based on mathematical models
are often highly normative, in the sense that they advise the actor
on how he ought to act if he seeks to maximize one or more goals
(e.g., profit), under a carefully delineated set of circumstances (e.g.,
a perfect dice game, with two players). Other theories tend to draw
more on information about past experiences, present allocation of
resources, etc. (e.g., «One ought not change one's course in mid-stream.»). (b) The degree of separation of normative and empirical elements is another relevant issue. (c) The scope of the unit of action may vary. A theory can, for example, stress macro-units or micro-units (e.g. classes or voters). (d) Theories use varying substantive labels to describe the elements or origins of change (e.g. economic, or psychological). (e) Strategies also differ in their degree of self-confidence, that is, the degree to which they guard against their own failure. It seems that those which view man more rationally (e.g. mathematical and related economic theories) tend also to be more self-confident.

Both structural and phenomenological approaches need to be pursued further if the study of strategy is to be integrated into sociology.
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