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SPECIAL ISSUE

CHANGES IN AMERICAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE

BY WILBERT E. MOORE*

AFTER long neglect, particularly on the part of social scientists, the topic of social change is now fashionable. It appears that the experts have belatedly recognized what the general populace knew all along, that we are in the midst of change of unprecedented scope and speed, and the end is not in sight. Reflections on social change are not novel, of course. Retrospective reflections, particularly by older persons, often yield views of less than total enthusiasm for alterations in standards, conventions, and even magnitudes of social relations. Awareness of current rapid change, however, is relatively recent but now widespread. Even more novel, and less widespread, is the awareness that much of our changing situation is the consequence of deliberate action—the intended result or a by-product of decisions and plans.

The new awareness of change has caused some overdue reconsideration of theoretical and methodological models in fields such as my own discipline of sociology. Our theory and our analytical procedures are primarily designed to detect and predict interdependence rather than trends or sequences. The crisis in that discipline need not detain us here, except that we must be warned that the repertory of scientific principles and procedures that might clarify the current confusion is in fact meager. Yet we must press on bravely, for rapid change presents new problems in both private and public sectors of our society. We must approach them as sensibly as we can.

I shall use the term *social structure* in a very general sense: patterned behavior. Thus phenomena as widely different as the temporal pattern of traffic flows and the modes of formal organization in business corporations are comprised in the concept. The minimum components of a social structure are *roles*, which are standardized actions expected of occupants of *positions*, conforming to *rules* that govern role behavior and thus the *relationships* among positions. This abstract way of characterizing social structure has

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the virtue, already noted, of encompassing any patterned behavior and thus permitting attention to relationships across a wide spectrum of differences in scale. It should be noted in passing that we are not equating social structure with status gradations — as often occurs in the writings of economists, for example. Rather, the forms of social inequality represent sub-types of the generic term *structure*.

The abstract definition of social structure leaves much too much latitude for a relatively brief and coherent discussion. One mode of simplifying organization would be to attend to the major institutional contexts of social behavior, such as the family, religion, education, the economy, and the polity. One consequence of adopting this alternative would be a reinvention of the chapter titles of introductory sociology texts, which is not an evil prospect *per se*, but still presents an impossibly formidable agenda for this occasion.

The alternative we have adopted is to focus attention on certain pervasive *processes of change*, processes that impinge on the family, the economy, the polity, and so on. These processes we shall identify as differentiation, organization, and participation, each comprising several sub-sets of social transformations. We shall find that these processes are not wholly autonomous but rather intersecting (in federal prose, interdigitated) patterns of change.

I. DIFFERENTIATION

Despite mountainous mole-hills of prose from subterranean critics of contemporary society, I can find no substantial and credible evidence for the dismal doctrine of "mass culture." The supposedly stultifying standardization produced by the mass media has at most resulted in some superficial commonalities: fashions, fads, and the latest, volatile "in" vocabulary and status symbols. Yet even language, which would seem most subject to standardization, retains its authentic regional accents, and all sorts of other differences abide and abound.

A. *Growth and Specialization*

Continuing specialization of roles and organizations is often taken as a sort of datum in the analysis of social change, a kind of prime mover not itself explained. I suggest that in American society we can identify three sources of specialization: (1) population growth and increasing density, providing opportunities for specialization and virtually assuring it; (2) the rapid growth of knowledge and of rational technique, so that any individual can command only a small portion of the total stock; (3) the rapid expansion of options in both products and practices, permitting discretionary choices and novel combinations by eclectic mixture.

Occupational specialization¹ is certainly the most conspicuous form of rapid differentiation of adult roles. Some of the historic effect of technical changes in productive processes, and the one that invited the most critical comment, has been the *dilution* of skills through the subdivision of tasks. At no time, however, has this form of specialization been the unique or sovereign tendency, since an increasingly complex productive system has also demanded new skills and new skill combinations. The long-term trend has been for an upgrading of the minimum and average skill levels, and the most modern productive technology restores to production workers a large measure of machine mastery.

Occupational specialization exemplifies the intersection of increased size of units and increased useful knowledge to be translated into productive tasks. Yet just as the less-skilled worker is threatened by actual displacement by mechanization, the highly skilled worker and the professional are threatened by technical obsolescence by failure to keep pace with the expansion of relevant knowledge, and the modern manager is by no means exempt from the demand to be a learner throughout his career. Indeed, the manager is now faced with unprecedented complexity, for in most instances he cannot pretend to be a leader and exemplar by being more skilled than any of his subordinates. His prime role now is that of coordinator of specialists; in a sense, his prior authority is impaired while his task becomes more complex.²

Specialization is also exemplified in the wondrous range of organizational forms, not only to produce and distribute goods and services or to govern and maintain order, but to prosecute special interests or indulge in various recreational and expressive activities. Although many organizations may "just happen," a wondrous amount of time and energy is spent in inventing organizations; eclecticism is a conspicuous feature of new organizations.

Organizational specialization has gone so far that it is difficult to find a broad-purpose — the sociological term is "functionally diffuse" — organization beyond the family. Some genuine neighborhoods exist, and a few genuine communities, but these are not immune to the divisive or at least fractionating effects of specialized organizations. As the family has become about the only place where an individual may legitimately display an emotion, it sometimes cracks under the strain. Yet the demise of the family as a functionally important unit of society is not imminent.

¹ See Moore, *Changes in Occupational Structures*, in *SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND MOBILITY IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT* ch. VI (N. Smelser & S. Lipset eds. 1966).

² See W. MOORE, *THE CONDUCT OF THE CORPORATION* ch. IV (1966).

Eclecticism is a conspicuous feature in styles of life. For the lowest income sectors, market choice is of course radically restricted. For others, the tremendous variety of alternative goods and services permits a wider choice. (Incidentally, for the marketing-minded, the moral is clear: income is a poor predictor of life styles. Education and occupation will predict part of the differences better than income levels.)

Specialization, whether of occupations, organizations or styles of life, poses problems of coordination. We shall return later to organization as our second pervasive process, for coordination is by no means automatic.

B. *Inequality, Old and New*

The notion of America as a "classless" society has not been taken seriously by scholars, but I feel, with decreasing justification. Not that the United States has ever had a genuinely equalitarian social order, nor is that precisely the trend. Rather, the semblance of hereditary strata, never absolute, has been steadily eroded by very strong intergenerational mobility and by the lack of sharp discontinuities across most of the status distributions in the society. The closest approaches to genuine strata are to be found at the very top and very bottom of income or other status differentials. Neither "class" is impermeable, but there are strong tendencies to self-perpetuation. For the substantial majority of the population the term "middle mass" has been suggested,³ though that suggests a homogeneity that does not exist. Rather, there are multiple gradations on one or another basis of ranking, but inconsistencies abound, the distinctions are often fine and somewhat arbitrary, and mobility is widespread between generations and within careers. Again, the tendency of Americans to identify themselves in polls and sample surveys as "middle class" may be more accurate than the views of critics who find this behavior amusing.

We should not leave the subject of inequality without a comment on poverty, now so much in public discussion. Aside from the aged and those having one or another disability — which constitute a fair portion of the poor⁴ — the problem of poverty involves the hereditary poor. As long as there is a range of income distributions, those at the lower end are relatively poor. But if the range is relatively narrow, the minima tolerably high, and the avenues of mobility by merit open, the inequality would be relatively consistent with our professed values. The current difficulties are several: (1)

³ Wilensky, *Orderly Careers and Social Participation: The Impact of Work History on Social Integration in the Middle Mass*, 26 AM. SOCIOLOGICAL REV. 521,539 (1961).

⁴ See Rein & Miller, *Poverty, Policy, and Purpose: The Dilemmas of Choice*, in *ECONOMIC PROGRESS AND SOCIAL WELFARE* ch. III (L. Goodman ed. 1960).

The general rise in levels of income and in broadening opportunities has left some segments of the population behind — mainly Negroes and some rural whites. (2) Poverty has become a minority phenomenon, and thus does not command widespread engagement for alleviating the problem. (3) Certain structural changes such as the increased reliance on formal education as an intergenerational mechanism of mobility and occupational sorting device may have actually decreased the opportunities for escape. To the degree that mechanical aptitudes, athletic ability, or entrepreneurial skill for starting a small business become progressively shut off as mobility opportunities, the occupational system becomes less open despite other expanded opportunities. Of course, the culturally deprived child does not even have "access to motivation" to want to achieve even when the opportunities are nominally open.⁵ A very considerable social ingenuity will be required to overcome this structural defect in American society.

C. Ecological Redistribution

Another form of social differentiation might appear at first glance to represent increasing homogeneity through urbanization. Certainly the rapid pace of rural-urban migration, together with the impact of modern transportation and communication on towns and villages, has radically reduced the "cultural" and even the organizational differences between city and country. However, the urbanization process has led to new forms of differentiation that seriously challenge the capacity of "inherited institutions" to cope with the complexity.

The "invasion" of central cities by Negroes (and, especially in the East, by Puerto Ricans) perpetuates a long-established pattern of ethnic concentration by successive immigrant groups. However, the assimilation of ethnic groups into the main stream of American life has proved to be conspicuously more difficult where "racial" distinctions are drawn. Dispersion of Negroes, occupationally and especially residentially, appears to be a very slow process. Meanwhile, and in some part owing to the concentration of Negroes in central cities, the process of suburbanization goes on apace. In larger metropolitan complexes, suburbs become differentiated, not only by income level but also by other social characteristics; some suburbs are quiet, some "swinging," some "cultural" and some recreational. Yet the common problems of metropolitan areas — air and stream pollution, traffic congestion, the provision of public services — are difficult or impossible to solve by traditional modes of political or-

⁵ See J. COLEMAN and others, EQUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY (U.S. Dep't of Health, Education, and Welfare Publication, 1966).

ganization. Again, substantial social inventiveness will be required to avoid an increasingly chaotic style of social differentiation.

D. *Pluralism*

The notion of American society as a "melting pot," assimilating diverse national and ethnic stocks into a single, homogeneous amalgam, had the disadvantage of most metaphors: exaggeration. Regional, ethnic, political, and religious differences persist, intersect, and add new elements of diversity in American social behavior. These differences represent a partial conspectus of *tolerable* disagreements; others include such preferences as cuisine, artistic taste, or form of recreation. Arguments may occur, with occasional emotion and even hostility, but divisions are either highly regularized — as in political parties — or recognized as not commanding preemptive allegiance.

The view adopted here is that pluralism is growing rather than decreasing in American society. More traditional sources of difference have been supplemented by newer forms of differentiation based on education and occupation. The result is far from a homogeneous community, but it is not necessarily one full of conflict or disorder.

Two principal dangers are evident in the rampant American pluralism: one is the ever-present possibility that common values or goal-orientations will be undermined or forgotten in the quest for distinctiveness. Secondly, some differences may come to be treated invidiously, some preferences or traditional differences may be regarded as unacceptable, and persistent allegiance to them may lead to segregation and discrimination. American history and contemporary American society offer ample examples of successful pluralism and of dangerous divisiveness.

[T]he greatest perils of pluralism come not so much from frontal oppositions but from such a degree of discretionary specialization that a common identity or a common culture is lost to a host of diverse organizational interests. The other side of tolerance is indifference, and that may go to the point of disengagement.⁶

II. ORGANIZATION

Virtually everything that engages more than one person's interests gets organized in American society. The independent craftsman, tradesman, or professional is a diminishing category, and many a repairman handles the accounts of franchised dealers, and many a professional nominally in private practice is in fact in group practice or partnership. Even play gets organized: conspicuously so in the case of commercialized — it is a mistake to say professionalized —

⁶ W. MOORE, *The Individual in an Organizational Society*, in ORDER AND CHANGE: ESSAYS IN COMPARATIVE SOCIOLOGY 226 (1967).

spectator sports, but also in country clubs, bridge clubs, collectors' societies, and, so help me, girl watching societies. Traditional individualism is steadily eroded by the conformity-demands of nominally immortal organizations, which exist prior to the individual's tour of duty, and will survive him despite his possibly disruptive acts.⁷ In effect, however, the traditionally treasured individualism was not a pure and simple ideal, but had its highest relevance in the notion of an atomistic and impersonal market for goods and services. And since organized production and organized distribution have been characteristic of industrialism since its inception, individualism often came to mean the inequitable irresponsibility of exploitative employers or individualism by default rather than by design for the individual who did not exactly fit into the conventional arrangements.

Why should organizations multiply, and become more complex? Certainly a major part of the answer lies with social differentiation, already examined. And the character of contemporary differentiation is such that common understandings and the unspoken consensus must be increasingly rare. Aims become explicated, means for their achievement worked out, and formal groups set up for mobilizing effort and assigning tasks to participants. It used to be difficult to distinguish between apathy and simple contentment with ongoing arrangements; now apathy means a genuine withdrawal, for informal arrangements do not serve, and formal ones require positive participation.

A. *Bureaucratization*

By now the word has finally got around: bureaucracy is not an evil, do-nothing complex of offices uniquely characterizing national governments, but a type of organization to be found wherever numbers of specialized task-performers are coordinated in a system of graded steps of authority. Private corporations are as bureaucratic, by any of the standard tests, as are public agencies. The extension of bureaucracy, or administrative organization, into most of the world of work has not entirely dissipated the negative connotation of the original term. The reason for that is that size and specialization produce formalization of rules and procedures, of job specifications and the jurisdictions of components. There is as much tendency to formulate and apply rules mindlessly in the corporate world as in the publicly-supported agency.

The simplest measure of bureaucratization is the proportion of wage and salary earners among those gainfully occupied. It will scarcely be surprising that this ratio is highly correlated with the level of economic development, taken comparatively among coun-

⁷ See W. WHYTE, JR., *THE ORGANIZATION MAN* (1956).

tries at a point of time, and also increases with the level of economic performance. In the United States this proportion exceeds four-fifths of the labor force.⁸

Subordination is partly softened by widespread sharing, and specialization further softens the authority of superiors, as already noted. Nevertheless, the intersection between individual personality and organized, collective goals must always be partial except for the patently pathological bureaucrat (often, unfortunately, an executive) who has no other interest in life.

Public and private bureaucracies share some irrational tendencies, which I cannot here document in detail:⁹ overstaffing with needless subordinates, who merely add to the entourage of administrators, but not to the efficacy of performing the mission; overstaffing with advisers of dubious value, on the chance that their magic will work, or on the grounds that some competitor has seen fit to add such an advisory function; a proliferation of essentially silly rules and controls, based originally on some real or imagined human frailty, and mindlessly applied thereafter to otherwise conscientious and possibly creative employees.

Every bureaucratic organization of substantial size (say, one hundred members or more) faces the perennial dilemma of centralization for the sake of uniformity and decentralization for the sake of temporal efficiency (not to mention the morale of lesser managers and workers). There is no known perfect solution to this problem. The primary tendency is toward centralization, but reversals occur, and occasionally leave some residue of autonomy with component units. The growing technical specialization of nominally subordinate units is a powerful basis for localism.

Bureaucracies commonly have been supposed to be inflexible, almost crystalline structures. The virtues of predictable continuity in performance do indeed encourage a kind of rule-regarding posture. Yet the very diversity now built into the personnel of administrative organizations assures some discord in non-routine decisions, and the fact that various staff specialists have external clienteles assures further lack of harmony. Despite the depressingly negative connotations of the term bureaucracy, there is a remarkable flexibility in such organizations in responding to external or internal stimuli.

Yet the stimuli generated are diverse, and the arguments propounded by advisers far from consensual. The old-style executive would not have tolerated such a discordant chorus and he would have made any decision on the basis of accumulated experience.

⁸ See Moore, *supra* note 1.

⁹ See W. MOORE, *supra* note 2.

Experience is not now despicable, but it is known to be untrustworthy. The contemporary executive is trained in rational decision processes, with variable inputs of information and advice, and with variable credibility ratings and weights in the composite outcome. He may not be more often right; but in view of increased complexity and uncertainty, he is fortunate if he is not more often wrong.

Perhaps the most important feature of contemporary bureaucratic organization — and that feature grows apace — is the attempt to predict, cause, and control social change, and not merely react to environmental alterations. "Research and development" accounts for a growing proportion of corporate budgets, whether from their own funds or on governmental contracts. Universities, too, have greatly expanded research activities, to the degree that in most of the nominally private institutions more than half of the annual budget comes from federal sources. To these components of "the knowledge industry"¹⁰ we must add research agencies within government and a great proliferation of not-for-profit organizations engaged exclusively in research. Technology has become a major component of investment policy, both private and public.

There is a very popular notion abroad in the land that technology is an automatic, autonomous, and indeed sovereign source of social change. This idea is, of course, much admired by technologists, for after all that makes them leaders, but it will not pass muster as a social theory. To a remarkable degree, in the modern world every economy or society gets about the technology that it deserves, or at least what it is able and willing to support.¹¹

We have weapons rather than clean streams, moon shots rather than efficient urban transit, packaging machines but no depackaging machines because real decision-makers have allotted resources and mobilized talents for some changes and not for others.

The organization and institutionalization of change adds a considerable measure of predictability to outcomes, though accidents and unforeseen by-products will occur, and successive attempts will be made to bring those under control also.

There is another, and troublesome, aspect to the pervasively organized character of American life. To a growing degree decisions are "collective," made on behalf of others by persons in essentially fiduciary positions. Consider assets. Certainly the major part of our total national assets are held by units of government or by private corporations and various non-profit organizations. They are held in one form or another of trust, and decisions about them are not made in the first instance by beneficiaries. I do not suggest that we

¹⁰ See generally F. MACHLUP, *THE PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE UNITED STATES* (1962).

¹¹ W. MOORE, *The Impact of Technological Change on Industrial Organization*, in *ORDER AND CHANGE*, *supra* note 6, at 88.

attempt to turn the clock back, to return to days that were better only through nostalgic distortion. I do suggest that the conduct of fiduciaries, whether public officials or corporate executives, is not clearly governed by rules that will assure equity to the various interests involved. One can confidently expect successive attempts to clarify rights and responsibilities, to make power "responsible."

B. *Voluntarism*

The bureaucratization of productive tasks does not end the pervasive character of organization. Both interest-oriented and expressive associations appear to multiply faster than the general growth of population, and undoubtedly reflect the increasing formalization of relationships associated with urbanization, and the increasing differentiation of positions and life styles. Though organizations do offer new forms of social participation, a point to which we shall return, the voluntarism that they exemplify is not untainted. The interest-oriented association is *for* some cause and thus against others. Those whose interests would be adversely affected by the association's success are virtually forced into a counter-organization. The right to be a non-joiner is being steadily eroded, and about that we may perhaps be allowed a faint note of regret.

III. PARTICIPATION

American society has always fallen well short of the democratic ideal of universal adult participation in political processes. Aside from residential, educational, and property qualifications for the franchise — qualifications gradually liberalized over the long term — the citizenry has exhibited considerable apathy. Some of the apathy certainly has been associated with lack of local community ties, poor education, and poverty, even if those impediments do not constitute formal disqualifications. The extremely low participation by urban Negroes in anti-poverty programs designed to elicit some sharing of decisions is now widely known. Yet civil rights activities have attracted somewhat wider participation. Indeed, there may be a somewhat justifiable suspicion that conventional political organizations, and perhaps even novel ones that are externally sponsored, aim at co-opting rather than genuinely representing Negroes and other essentially disfranchised sectors of the population. As broader participation is pressed, we may continue to witness various forms of unconventional politics. New forms of participation may well challenge the constituted order, and may indeed here and there go well beyond the tolerable limits for the maintenance of public safety. Yet they bespeak involvement rather than apathy, and may lead to genuine improvement in the society's operation.

There is a further development in all post-industrial societies that merits attention. All such societies have become "welfare states" in various forms and degrees. One consequence of such welfare policies is to extend the common rights and privileges of citizenship — that is, simply being part of the society — in contrast to the differential claims to income and prestige from competitive or essentially chance sources (such as property inheritance).¹² To educational, political, and labor force participation may be added access to various services, including medical and legal ones. Creeping socialism this may be — though many private corporations have long recognized certain uniform claims on services. I should prefer to call it creeping democracy as long as we keep private alternatives to public programs.

CONCLUSION

The very rapidity of contemporary change may lead to the mistaken impression that all is in flux. Yet some change remains gradual and essentially evolutionary. The family's emergence as the major source of personal integrity has been gradual. Our political system is also essentially evolutionary, though it could be argued that its change has been unduly slow in the management of such problems as those confronting metropolitan areas.

We should also note that some values and rules have a hardy survival power. Aside from such collective values as national patriotism and such commonly held individual values as longevity, health, and economic well-being, we also share such expectations as punctuality and trust. Perhaps even more important than these enduring values and expectations, and particularly in view of continuous differentiation, is the continuing reliance on the procedures for resolving differences. According to circumstances we rely on the democratic vote, bargaining and negotiation, and, if necessary, judicial processes that provide for litigation of disputes through advocacy on the part of adversaries. On the whole, these prove to be effective "tension-management" devices. Even if we may have to invent new ways of coping with problems, these are likely to endure.

¹² See T. MARSHALL, CLASS, CITIZENSHIP, AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT (1964). See especially *id.* ch. IV.