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SOCIAL CHANGE AND SOCIAL ACTION

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We define social action as a strategy to obtain limited social change at the intermediate or macro levels of society which is generally used in nonconsensus situations and employs both "norm-adhering" and "norm-testing" modes of intervention.¹ In this formulation, the key concept is social change. This paper proposes to explore certain aspects of social change as they apply to social action.

The discussion is divided into two parts. The first is a brief summary of pertinent social change theory, presented as background for part two in which are presented and discussed certain propositions about planned change that are critical to any social action endeavor. This treatment, obviously, will not cover every sub-concept of social change that is applicable to social action. Nor does it include a direct discussion of power, crucial as this is for social action; that requires a separate treatment of its own. Only five concepts are selected and discussed: social movements, crisis, conflict, resistance to change, and legitimacy.

Social Change

Implicit in the above definition is the idea that social action is a strategy neither for revolutionary change nor for altering the behavior of individuals and small groups. Rather, it is for change in that interstitial area which goes beyond the daily modifications of interpersonal and small group behavior, but stops short of fundamental and radical transformations in the social structure. The purpose of social action is not to effect changes in the personality system or in the routine administration and management of formal organizations, but in the programs and policies of organizations and institutions. Moreover, social action directs itself to changes within social systems rather than changes of social systems themselves. "Change within the system refers to change that does not alter the system's basic structure Change of the system is any change that alters the system's basic structure."² In this sense,³ social action is liberal, rather than what Boguslaw calls radical social action.

Change through social action differs from other forms of change. Being purposive change, it is distinct from natural or accidental change even though the latter also may have social and political consequences. It is a strategy of planned change, not a spontaneous, unpremeditated or accidental intervention in societal processes.

It likewise differs from those changes that occur as a result of cumulative innovations in technology, ecological and demographic shifts, urbanization, industrialization, and modernization. Furthermore, it differs from such other methods of planned change as social planning and community development.⁴

The aim of social action is not per se and directly to change people's values and attitudes, however important this may be for lasting change, but to modify the policies and priorities of social, economic and political institutions. In this sense, it is social action, and not cultural or psychological action, although, except for analytical purposes, such a distinction is sometimes hard to maintain.

The nature of social change is greatly disputed. Equilibrium theories, conflict theories, evolutionary theories, and rise and fall theories seek to explain social change in their own particular terms. That there is a lack of consensus on the definition is understandable, given the many variables that must be embraced: change is wrought by natural forces as well as by human effort; it is both adaptive and maladaptive for the society, or adaptive for some parts of the society and maladaptive for others; there is large scale and small scale change; its pace is rapid or slow; its time span short or long; here it is ephemeral, there of lasting duration; it may be marked by a continuity or a discontinuity in the societal process; it may affect only one or many parts of the social system simultaneously.

Depending on their purpose, background, available data, predilections and selection from among this range of variables, theorists have stressed the influence of legal or economic forces, science and technology, demography, values and value conflicts, ideology, leadership, political forces, urbanization and industrialization, education, mass media, conflict, social movements or social planning as key causes of social change. Today, therefore, most sociologists hold that a variety of factors cause, expedite, impede, and prevent change. The appeal of grand theorists and classical explanations notwithstanding "there is no reason to suppose that all knowledge that would ever excite human interest can be included in one single, simple law."⁵ Unlike the law of gravity, as far as we now know, there is no one law of social change.

Subscribing to a multifactor explanation of social change, however, forces us to face the humbling fact that our present knowledge consists, to a considerable degree, in classifying and interrelating the many variables that affect the course of change. It means that it is impossible to give a rule of thumb as to how to effect change. As there is no single, usable theory of social change, the best that can be done at this stage in the development of the art is to offer certain propositions, the understanding of which is, one hopes, useful to the social actionist. This is what we will attempt.

Social Movement

The first proposition concerns the close relationship between social action and social movements. Many phenomena characteristic of social movements are also characteristic of social action, and the goals of the latter frequently consciously con-

tribute to the goals of the former. It is perhaps because social action and social movements have so many similarities that social actionists often find themselves supporting social movements. Insight into the genesis, sources, types, ideological foundations, organizational structure, and the career of social movements is thus valuable for the social actionist, for social movements are social action writ large.

Social movements are "socially shared demands for change in some aspects of the social order."⁶ They are based on the assumption that collective action can be more effective than the isolated activities of individuals. They depend on a group's shared values and objectives, and grow strong on generalized beliefs that challenge extant ideologies and institutions. Participants in social movements are thrown together in a common cause and a sense of membership in a group that usually develops its own structure and a division of labor between leaders and followers.⁷ They largely come from those groups who are dissatisfied with at least part of the dominant social order, and who challenge the legitimacy of prevailing values and institutions. They precipitate public controversy, crystallize issues, and at times polarize the citizenry. To be successful they must not simply reject existing values and institutions but propose a counter ideology and vision of how certain aspects of the society should be reorganized.⁸

Social movements, thus, serve many social purposes: they force a crystallization of public opinion and promote a sense of solidarity among participants; they heighten the personal stake of citizens in the commonweal and provide a training ground in organizational leadership; when successful, they result in an accommodation between the demands of the participants and the rule systems of major social institutions. And even when they fail, they fulfill a broad educative function and inject into the society at large the ideologies and beliefs that fathered them.⁹

Crisis

The second proposition concerns the role of crisis in social change. Although not always a necessary or sufficient condition, crisis often creates the demand for and facilitates the acceptance of change. The function of crisis in inducing change has received considerable attention in the literature. And this throws us into another sociological controversy. There is no unanimity among students of the subject as to whether the sources of change lie within the structure or are entirely extrinsic to it.

We think there is evidence to support the view of Parsons that "the potential sources of structural change are exogenous and endogenous -- usually in combination."¹⁰

Whether its originating conditions are internal or external, change is often preceded and accompanied by a situation of crisis and tension. In its simplest sense, crisis is a condition in which the human being, group or organization is no longer able to continue its accustomed way of behavior.¹¹ Crises are interruptions of habitual ways, occasioning a loss of control. They demand that individual and group attention be aroused to meet an unusual situation. Agony in crises lies in this, that they demand full consciousness and attention to an event that threatens to sweep away

the habitual ways we have for maintaining control over ourselves and the things around us. For this reason, during periods of crisis a group more readily accepts change and the intervention of a change agent who proposes to reduce the agonizing, to direct to new goals, to establish new programs and priorities, and to regularize life again.

Consistent with his theory of change, Nisbet insists that crises are always preceded and precipitated by a historical event which is invariably external to the social structure itself.¹² Moore, on the other hand, argues that tensions or strains are often the "probable sites of change."¹³ Both views may be valid. We suggest that what is important to recognize is that tensions and crises are fertile soil for social change whether they originate internally or externally to the social system in question.

In suggesting a correlation between crises and social change we are not implying a causal connection, but simply that crises do tend to generate conditions that are sufficiently discomfiting as to precipitate change. It is the probability of a crisis situation inducing change that led recent strategists of social action to create conditions in which business as usual could not proceed. Norm-testing change tactics such as disruptive demonstrations rest on the likelihood that they will create crisis.¹⁴ It must be remembered, however, that resolving the crisis through change will not necessarily restore an equilibrium; change itself will almost certainly produce new crises and tensions just as it may have reduced past crises and tensions.¹⁵

Conflict

The third proposition is that significant social change, involving as it invariably does a redistribution of power and privilege, rarely avoids conflict. "A conflict exists whenever incompatible activities occur."¹⁶ It arises from many sources: from scarcity of resources like money and status, or differences in information, beliefs, goals and values, or from different desires, interests, perceptions and priorities. Dahrendorf accounts for conflict ultimately in the authority relationships that obtain in every social structure. "The structural origin of such group conflicts must be sought in the arrangement of social roles endowed with expectations of domination or subjection. Wherever there are such roles, group conflicts. . . are to be expected."¹⁷ Social action usually seeks to realign that arrangement of social roles and scarce resources. When the action is contested and opposed, as it frequently is, the issue is joined and conflict ensues.

Conflict as a strategy does not invariably lead to the intended change. Coser's distinction between realistic and nonrealistic conflict is well known. Conflict may be so vague, meaningless and unlocalized, and so nonrealistic, as to be dysfunctional. Nonrealistic conflict is pursued, not as a rational means to achieve a change goal or as part of a planned strategy, but simply as a release of aggressive tension, and so is pursued as an end in itself.¹⁸

Deutsch makes a distinction between constructive and destructive conflict.¹⁹

Constructive conflict is not unreigned, but teleologically controlled. Destructive conflict has a tendency to escalate indiscriminately. Its consequences are difficult to predict, it courses beyond control, losing connection with its original purpose, it expands in numerous dimensions. The initial goal is displaced, the process of scapegoating let loose. A Gresham's Law of Conflict comes into play in which harmful and dangerous elements drive out those forces that seek to keep conflict within reasonable bounds.²⁰ So called "absolute conflict" in which the end is the annihilation of the opponent rather than a mutually agreed upon settlement, is rarely, if ever, functional. Enduring conflicts of this kind are excessively costly for society and not the business of social action. If conflict is deemed necessary, cessation of conflict through a resolution and agreement by both parties is equally necessary.²¹ In employing conflict as a planned strategy, therefore, the social actionist should incorporate as part of the plan some concept of its settlement and constructive resolution, and this will usually, if not invariably, be through some form of compromise between the parties in conflict.

When used as a means to a known and attainable goal, conflict can be both functional and constructive. To use conflict in this way the social actionist must be able to pinpoint the issues that divide so that the boundaries of the fight can be clearly established; he must also recognize and clarify the basic areas of interdependence between the contending parties. Conflict is essentially an interactional process between parties who are interdependent. They need one another. Their interdependence defines, as it were, the ground rules for the contest; it enables the parties to become polarized over the precise issues and to stake out their positions without introducing goals, means or issues that are destructive; and it permits them to test one another and engage in a struggle with reasonable assurance that the entire social system in question will not fall apart.

In fact, the social system may, as a result of the conflict achieve a higher unity. Constructive conflict rationally pursued presupposes that the contending parties have accepted some rules governing their relationship and their hostilities. Out of the conflict can come a new set of norms governing their relationship and the society at large. As Coser observes, "By bringing about new situations, which are partly or totally undefined by rules and norms, conflict acts as a stimulus for the establishment of new rules and norms."²² This form of conflict can be socially constructive, offering the prospect, once it is resolved, of a closer and more meaningful bond between the conflicting parties.

Resistance to Change

The fourth proposition concerns the factor of resistance to change. Whenever social action pursues a course of significant social change, resistance to the change will be encountered, and must be contended with. Significant social change is invariably met with hesitation, ridicule, suspicion and rejection from powerful groups in the society. This is expected since social change of any consequence adversely affects the life situation of some groups.²³ Resistance is behavior to prevent change or to protect an individual from the effects of change. The effects may be real or imaginary.²⁴ Mechanisms of resistance exist both within the personality and the social system. The social system resists change, using such mechanisms as: (1) conformity

to norms, social norms performing for the social system the same resistance function that habits perform for the individual; (2) systemic and cultural coherence, the attitude that, since all the parts of the system are interdependent and attempts to change one part may have unforeseen detrimental side-effects, all innovations, therefore, should be resisted; and (3) rejection of outsiders, who are suspect of having different values and norms and so their proposals for change are not seen compatible with the social and cultural system in question.²⁵ In general, as Allen summarizes, social systems tend to resist innovations which interfere with their basic needs of pattern maintenance and tension-management, adaptation, goal attainment and integration.²⁶

Resistance is stiffest among the vested interests, as they were dubbed by Veblen.²⁷ The vested interests are fundamentally concerned with retaining the existing pattern of rewards and sanctions which are embedded in the established system of role expectations. These rewards and sanctions with their consequent gratifications for the vested interests may be in the political, economic or social realms. According to Parsons, the phenomenon of vested interests pervades all social change, change being possible only by overcoming the resistance of vested interests. "It is, therefore," he says, "always essential explicitly to analyze the structure of the relevant vested interest complex before coming to any judgment of the probable outcome of the incidence of forces making for change."²⁸

Equally pervasive and perhaps even more deeply entrenched are the guardians of traditional and, especially, sacred values and group ideals.²⁹ It is, therefore, crucial to know and gauge a society's commitment to moral precepts and sacred beliefs as well as to organizational patterns. As Ryan says, "Innovations are generally tested against this 'moral order,' to assess their consistency or inconsistency and their supportive or destructive consequences for these aspects of life which are held dear and inviolable."³⁰ This testing of innovations against accepted social norms is applicable to the secular as well as the sacrosanct; no change in any social unit escapes it.

Failure to recognize the stubborn persistence of cultural and organizational norms handicaps from the start the change efforts of the social actionist. Nothing perhaps is more important than that he clearly understand the norms of the organization and the value orientation of the social unit with which he is working. Otherwise he may find that he is totally unable to establish his authority with the change target. For him, therefore, the following questions are crucial: what values does the group hold most sacred? what norms and structures are most established and guarded? what functions do they serve? why are they adhered to with such persistence? will they facilitate or obstruct the change-goals? who are the guardians of the established norms?

It is worth noting that much of the literature on resistance to change comes either from the field of psychotherapy, in which resistance serves as an ingredient in the therapeutic process, or from the field of organizational and industrial psychology where the resistance of personnel is considered an obstacle to higher productivity and is thus sought to be reduced by educational and morale boosting efforts.

Likewise, cultural anthropologists and rural sociologists have pointed out how people in the developing countries have resisted technological innovation, as being in conflict with traditional values, and how mass educational programs have attempted to persuade them to integrate modern technology into their traditional world views. Social actionists face a different kind of resistance than clinical therapists, organizational psychologists, and cultural anthropologists. They face such groups as the economic and social elite, policy makers in public institutions and politicians that represent many powerful interest groups. How to reduce the resistance of these groups, when both the intended and perceived outcome of the effort is a redistribution of power, is something on which less is conclusively known and more systematic information is needed.

Legitimacy

A fifth proposition deals with one critical aspect of the concept of power, and that is its legitimation. Since social action is a vigorous questioning of the legitimacy of some aspect of the existing social order, the social actionist must establish his own legitimacy as a change agent. To carry this through to its successful termination in new change goals, he must establish his legitimacy with two groups: the underprivileged on whose behalf he seeks more power and resources, and the change target from whom he seeks to wrest some power and privilege. The underprivileged, although they may have most to gain by change, generally also stand the most to lose. The condition of most underprivileged could be worse as well as better, so that Marx's cry "you have nothing to lose but your chains" is not adequate to create a following and evoke a mandate to lead. The underprivileged more than others have been duped by high pressure salesmen selling the London Bridge. They are not without mistrust of medicine men who walk out of the middle class with their utopian wares. The underprivileged want bread and butter on the table now, which utopias seldom promise and rarely deliver. What can the social actionist really and surely deliver? His hopes for gaining legitimacy with the underprivileged rest on his response to that question.

As for the change target, on whatever base the social actionist chooses to rest his claim to introduce change--tradition, rationality, charisma, or some combination thereof--he cannot effectively challenge those in positions of power without having legitimated his own role as a change agent. As indicated above, a group reserves its most stubborn resistance to those changes that are perceived to be incompatible with the traditional order and value system, and which seem to violate the most cherished and "sacred" cultural norms. A change agent must establish the compatibility of his goals with the larger value system of the group. Therefore, he must not only specify what he wants in terms of an action goal, but also clearly state the basis on which he rests his authority to change the established order in moving toward that goal. He needs to be clear himself and to answer precisely the following questions: by what authority does he act? what in him, in his program, and in his course of action, is he asking them to legitimize? to what order of authority are they likely to respond: traditional norms and customs, law and rationality, intellectual leadership and expertise, economic self interest?

Notwithstanding precise and clear answers to these questions, the social actionist may nevertheless expect that his questioning of existing norms will not go unre-

buffed.³¹ It is ironic that the rebuff is likely to come from both friends and enemies. That shrewd observer of politics, Machiavelli, noted this more than 450 years ago in a passage on changing a state's constitution. His statement has equal validity for any major change.

The innovator makes enemies of all those who prospered under the old order, and only lukewarm support is forthcoming from those who would prosper under the new. Their support is lukewarm partly from fear of their adversaries, who have the existing laws on their side, and partly because men are generally incredulous, never really trusting new things unless they have tested them by experience. In consequence, whenever those who oppose the changes can do so, they attack vigorously, and the defense made by the others is only lukewarm. So both the innovator and his friends are endangered together.³²

Conclusion

While the literature on the subject of social action is not extensive, there is a long history of articles and books that stretches back to the early decades of this century. Most of these pieces are either exhortations to greater involvement or descriptive presentations of social action and the stages that it generally encompasses.³³ Only recently are serious attempts being made to study it conceptually and to relate it to its social science moorings so that it may serve as a more reliable instrument of planned change. This essay has attempted to contribute to this conceptual understanding. Techniques and tactics, and skill in using them, are obviously important in social action, but tactical skill must be joined to understanding and judgment. Effective planned change, ultimately, is a blend of intellectual analysis and skill in action. As Weber said of politics, it is "made with the head, but it is certainly not made with the head alone."³⁴ This paper has stressed the head, the importance of intellectual analysis as a prerequisite to successful action. It points to the necessity of conceptually grasping the reaguently complex fabric in which social action occurs. That fabric includes, among other major components, social movements, crisis, conflict, resistance and legitimacy.

One of Karl Marx's memorable dicta is: "Philosophers have interpreted the world; the need however is to change it." Over a hundred years have passed, a review of which makes us add to the Marxian dictum: the need is still to change the world, so let us understand it.

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