Sociological Realism: An Islamic Paradigm

By Ilyas Ba-Yunus

Ever since its revelation more than fourteen hundred years ago, the Qur'an has been the object of recitation and memorization, as well as scholarly analysis by millions in every generation. During this long span of time, not only religious scholars and jurists, but also other professionals like physicists, medical doctors, historians, and orientalists have tried to scrutinize and analyze the Qur'an. It is about time that sociologists paid attention to this primary source of Islam.

Sociological interest in the Qur'an, as belated as it is, is in fact natural, for, after a brief foray in the direction of what one may call *Origin Theology*, the basic thrust of the Qur'an remains ideological—humanity and its society in this world. Not that this is such a revealing idea. Whether one looks at it from a juristic point of view or from a historical perspective, it hardly escapes notice that the Qur'anic verses speak out loudly about the nature of plural living as fabricated by the crisscrossing episodes generated by very active, assertive, and expressive individuals over the course of history. Most of what has been going on in Islamic studies, under the rubric of law and history in particular, provides us with sufficient encouragement to cast a fresh look at the same source of knowledge.

Questions Sociological Theory Should Answer

As we have already seen, sociologists have at different times asked different and disparate, although quite relevant, questions. They have also been insufficient questions. For example, symbolic interactionists remained interested primarily in the indeterminstic nature of the human act. This microscopic preoccupation prevented them from asking questions about social processes of a larger magnitude. Even Blumer's emphasis on collective behavior, which showed an early promise for the analysis of revolutionary social change, has had only scant appeal for his fellow symbolic interactionists.

On the other hand, structural-functionalists as well as conflict theorists remained interested in the deterministic nature of the macro social order.

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By pursuing this interest, they generated a heated debate with respect to the extent of consensus and conflict in society.

Thus, although we have three major sociological theories in vogue today, there are only two major controversies: determinism vs. indeterminism, and conflict vs. consensus as determinants of social structure. What is needed is a dialogue on the relationship between individual social action and the society which provides it with its relevant context. In short, we need a more synthetic view of social interaction encompassng these controversies. This leads us to ask the following questions:

1. What is the nature of a given social act?
2. What is the nature of a given social order?
3. What is the relationship between the two?

In brief, these questions cut across the whole spectrum of contemporary theoretical sociology. By providing answers to these questions, one may find, hopefully, a resolution of the controversies which have beset sociological theory ever since its inception. These questions require a systematic and holistic paradigm which is both realistic and universal in scope. It must be realistic in the sense that it must appeal to the experiences of all those who read it, and it must be universal in the sense that it is applicable to all societies as they vary in time and space.

Basic Assumptions

Human society, also known as the society of *homo sapiens* or the progeny of Ādam and Hawwā' (Eve), is one of the many societies that are found in this world. In fact, a great many if not all of the living organisms in nature live in their respective communities with their own particular structures, so much so that some of these (i.e., microscopic bacteria and viruses) are identifiable mainly in terms of their respective colonies.

A comparison of animal and insect collectivities with that of human beings shows three major patterns. First, whereas animal and insect communities are species-specific universally, human society varies drastically from place to place. Second, whereas animal and insect societies do not seem to change or evolve over time, human society universally experiences evolutionary and/or revolutionary changes. Third, none of the animal or insect societies is as complex as even the most simple human society.

These observations raise some important questions: Why are animal and insect societies species-specific and stable in time and space? Why does human society vary in time as well as from place to place? Naturally, the answer to these questions could be sought in the nature of the organism as it may

relate to its social organization. The question about animals and bacteria might as well be left to zoologists and microbiologists. More pertinently, we may ask: What is there in the makeup of a human being that gives his/her society such a unique and dynamic character?

In general, sociologists have evaded this question. Classical European sociology, as represented by the contributions of such stalwarts as Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, and Spencer, does not even address this issue. In fact, early American sociologists have been more attentive to this problem. For example, Cooley devoted a whole book to relating human nature with human social order. Likewise Thomas, in formulating his "four wishes," remained interested in this very theme. However, both believed that human nature remains inseparable from the society in which a person is born and raised. Mead remained preoccupied with the concept of inborn human potential. But during his long tenure at Chicago, where he taught his social psychology, he could not find anything other than self-centeredness and symbolic ability which could be classified as aspects of inborn human nature.

Fortunately for Muslims, in some of its earlier verses and long before its ideological discourse, the Qur'an provides some fundamental observations on the original makeup of humanity. As will be seen below, more comprehensive assumptions about human nature may be derived from these observations.

Observation 1: The foremost and perhaps the most profound observation about humanity's makeup to be found in the Qur'an is that each member of the human race is composed of inherently unlike and mutually opposing elements. To begin with, Allah made each human being from lowly earthly material i.e., sounding clay (*ṣalṣāl ka al fakhkhār*), black odorous mud (*ḥama' masnūn*), clay (*ṭīn*) and simple earth (*turāb*). Having made humanity from this lowly substance, He then breathed into it what is perhaps the most sublime of all things – His own spirit; and man came to life (Qur'an 32:9).

Muslim 'ulama', both Sunni (i.e., Moududi, 1967) as well as Shi'i (Algar, 1979) are in general agreement that the Qur'an is alluding to the dual nature of humanity in these verses. More specifically, it has come to mean that while human beings have self-centered, acquisitive, and destructive tendencies on the one hand, they also have a tendency to be constructive, self-sacrificing, and altruistic on the other hand.

Observation 2: Secondly, "He created man and taught him speech" (Qur'an 55:4). Evidently, the word "speech" in this verse refers to the human ability to acquire and use language. Because human language is based on symbolism, it is assumed that this verse is pointing out humanity's symbolic ability. This ability includes not merely acquiring, but also changing and even producing new languages. This is perhaps the most distinguishing mark of human beings when compared to other living forms in creation. As is well known, animals

do possess and use vocal gestures for communication, yet they cannot change these gestures or acquire new forms of expression. Even if a parrot can imitate a person, it cannot speak his/her language. This is so because parrots do not possess symbolic ability. Due to this lack of symbolic ability, parrots cannot modify or build upon what they have heard – something which human beings start exhibiting as early as their pre-adolescent years. Due to this lack of symbolic ability, even the smartest parrot cannot philosophize or mathematize problems, despite its seemingly very interesting ability to mimic human sounds. In short, the above Qur'anic verse is pointing out that language ability is characteristically an inborn human trait.

Observation 3: At the simplest level, symbolic ability, which is at the root of human language ability, means giving non-inherently possessed meanings to things. Thus, certain meanings may be given to a piece of cloth when it is used as a flag. Indians fighting against the European settlers in America used smoke signals in order to convey coded messages. Likewise, a red light is used as a symbol of danger or as a visual command to stop. Even small children make use of symbols, such as making faces to convey a certain message. In a more general sense, symbolism also means to experience things by giving them meanings, understanding them, and thus gaining knowledge about them. It goes without saying that in the absence of language or with impaired language ability, human learning would be seriously hampered. The following Qur'anic verse also has something to say regarding human knowledge ability:

> Recall when your Lord said to the angels, "I am going to appoint a vicegerent on Earth." They said, "Are You going to make one who will cause destruction there and shed blood; and we are always engaged in praising You and earnestly?" He (the Lord) said, "I have in view what you do not know." And He taught Ādam the names of all things. Then He set these before the angels and asked, "Tell Me the names of all these if you are right (in thinking that this new creature would cause destruction)." They replied, "Praise be to You, we do not have any knowledge except the knowledge that You gave us. You are the most knowledgeable and most wise." Then He said, "Ādam, tell them the names of all these," and he (Ādam) told them the names of all things. Then He said, "Did I not tell you that I know the secrets of the Earth and the Heavens which are hidden from you? I know what you say and what you do not" (2:30-33).

Muslim 'ulama' are in general agreement that the word "names" in the verses referred to above means the essence and knowledge of all things in

creation. However, there are some other implications of these verses which should be mentioned.

First, as Moududi (1967, 59) pointed out, the knowledge bestowed upon human beings is superior to that given to the angels, who have only a rather limited and more specialized knowledge. On the other hand, the knowledge potential given to human beings is more general and more comprehensive.

Second, it means that the knowledge potential of human beings goes far beyond the acquired knowledge itself. After all, to name means not only to identify but also to explain, characterize, classify, relate, and differentiate. Human knowledge potential therefore differs from knowledge given to other forms in creation; not only is it wider in scope, but it is fundamentally analytical and, consequently, progressive.

Third, this analytical potential of humanity is its foremost qualification for being the vicegerent of Allah—an office for which even the angels could not qualify.

Fourth, humanity's ability to acquire knowledge is what can save it from spreading blood and destruction throughout the world. After all, the skeptical angels could be satisfied only by Ādam's demonstration of his knowledge potential. This implies that knowledge is the vehicle of peace and that ignorance is what causes destruction.

To summarize the above discussion, let us start with the assumption that human nature, as gleaned from the Qur'an, is such that by virtue of humanity's original makeup, human beings are:

1. a composite of diametrically opposite tendencies—self-centered, destructive materialism as well as self-sacrificing and spiritual altruism;
2. endowed with symbolic ability, which means that they can speak language(s), change language(s), and make new language(s);
3. endowed with knowledge ability, which means that they can acquire knowledge and produce further knowledge by developing the existing level of knowledge; and
4. endowed with the ability to govern, administer, and otherwise participate in the affairs of creation due to the possession of the above-discussed characteristics.

These characteristics, on the one hand, set humanity apart from animals and other created objects. On the other hand, these characteristics provide the backdrop for the nature and the dynamics of social interaction. It is mainly in terms of these traits that individual action may be explained, and that the relationship between the individual and his/her society may also be explained.

Based on these assumptions, it is now time to start trying to answer those questions raised above regarding the nature of human action, the nature of human society, and the relationship between the two.

The Nature of the Human Act

In emphasizing the dual nature of humanity, the Qur'an is illustrating an inherent dilemma in human nature—human nature is not fixed. It is not merely self-centered as Mead emphasized, nor is it merely altruistic either. This also means that these aspects of human nature, as predisposing as they might be, are not, in fact, predetermining. This is so because by being mutually opposing in essence, they tend to cancel each other out by pulling the individual in opposing directions. In its very opening dialogue on human nature, then, the Qur'an preempts any possible determinism and fatalism. Human beings are self-centered and materialistic, but they also have another option available to them. They are basically altruistic, but they can also be quite mean if they choose to be. This duality, then, explains the human ability to choose—to decide—a trait which is only rarely found in other created objects. What may be derived from the Qur'an, then, is the concept that *human nature is basically dilemmatic rather than instinctive.*[1] While instinct guides animal action, it takes an effort on the part of individual human beings to deal with the dilemma posed by the situation in which he/she finds himself/herself. In short, human action is a result of will—the decision-making ability which we have seen above and which stems directly from the fundamental duality in human nature. Mead also emphasizes human will, but does not give any reason for this distinctive human trait. He fundamentally assumes that "I" is self-centered as well as willful. Clearly, Islamic theory goes beyond Mead.

Human action (whatever an individual does in a given situation) is a solution to the dilemma posed by the given situation. It is the end product of a process initiated by a desire or an impulse to reach an objective. However, all human decisions to act—when and how or even not to act—primarily depend upon the knowledge acquired from direct or indirect encounters with the environment in specific situations. But, an individual is not merely a passive receptor of knowledge. More significantly, he/she is the willful picker and the analyzer and, thus, the maker of his/her knowledge. All of the knowledge which an individual allows to settle in his/her consciousness is tailor-made by him/her to reflect personal objectives, hopes, aspirations, fears, and biases. It follows that the objectivity of the phenomenon and the subjective knowledge of that phenomenon do not always tally. In the case of there being a high

[1]"Verily we have created man in toil and struggle." (Qur'an 90:4).

degree of congruity between the objective phenomenon and its subjective knowledge, it speaks not only for the resourcefulness, explicitness, and consistency in the source of knowledge, but also for the receptivity of the receiver. Whether or not there is any significant difference between the objectivity of the phenomenon and its subjective knowledge, the fact remains that the individual cannot but construct this portrait subjectively. In short, each individual is not merely the seeker but also the maker of his/her knowledge on the basis of which he/she makes a decision to act in a given situation.

If subjectively defined knowledge is crucial to human decision making, language ability is fundamental to any construction of knowledge. Language or speech is crucial to the ability to obtain knowledge and to make decisions, more so than any bodily or vocal gestures could ever be. First of all, gestures could hardly encompass such complex abstractions or equations as those noted above. Secondly, possessing a language also means that the phenomenon has to be experienced directly in order to learn about it, for it may be learned indirectly through transmission by others. In fact, most of our knowledge about this universe, about the society in which we live, and indeed about the socioeconomic and political processes in which we are interested, is for the most part a second-hard knowledge transmitted through such means as oral or written reports, books, newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. Thirdly, and more importantly, language ability also means not merely that we are able to communicate with others or to receive communication from others, but it also entails the ability to self-indicate and self-communicate. Whenever we encounter a situation, we explain to ourselves those of its dimensions which interest us the most. It is mainly through these self-indications that we are able to define and consider the objective phenomenon subjectively and, in the process, create our own personalized knowledge. Lastly, and quite plausibly, it is mainly through this process of self-indication that we are able to "signal" ourselves to move or not to move along a certain line of action. In this sense, language becomes a purely subjective tool in self-motivation.

It must be evident by now that the Islamic theoretical view of human action is basically indeterministic. This brings it much closer to Mead, but not without some notable differences. For instance, as mentioned above, Mead looks at humanity as being self-centered and materialistic. The Islamic view, on the other hand, is that human beings are both self-centered and altruistic at the same time. Whereas Mead does not explain the origin of human will, the Islamic view explains will as being the function of the dilemmatical nature of man.

The Nature of Society

To put it more simply, society is in essence a plurality of people cooperating, competing, and thus influencing one another within a given territory. Each individual in this plurality has the same basic nature as outlined above. As such, our assumptions about human nature remain fundamental to the analysis of human society, for they are basic to our view of any given individual human act. In fact, human social structure is determined universally by the original makeup of humanity as much as the structure of the bee society is determined by the nature of the bees making up that society.

Human action, individual or otherwise, becomes structured when it assumes a form by virtue of being performed in the same manner over and over again. Individual action may become structured as a result of habit, taste, superstition, or some other aspects of individual personality. Plural action becomes structured when many or most individuals in a given society interact similarly in similar circumstances. Social structure thus tends to fabricate an environment of expectations and deeds. Although we become used to its expectations and demands and may not always feel its pressure so profoundly by virtue of living in the same society for a long time, looked at from the point of view of a newcomer it may appear overwhelming. It must be overwhelming by the sheer weight of its plurality, although its impact does not always depend on numbers alone. A moment's reflection on child socialization brings home the brute fact that despite all the loving care they receive from their parents, children are often inducted into society's value and expectation systems with varying degrees of coercion. They often have to face and give credence to the moods and the temperamental vicissitudes of their parents and, in the case of an extended family, those of other relatives as well. The fact that the parents' love for their children more than compensates for their high-handedness must not obviate the fact that childhood is, perhaps, one of the stormiest periods in an individual's life. It is during this period that the untamed person learns, sometimes with open defiance but often with noisy protests, that he/she cannot always have his/her way.

Similarly, as we grow up and look back laughingly at the treatment we received from our elders, we face new situations of social coercion. Take the case of a young woman who may be in love with a bright young man but must consent to a marriage arranged by her parents, or of a football team which, playing for a home audience, is under constant pressure to live up to the audience's expectations, or of a political candidate facing an audience intent on hooting him/her down. In short, social pressure impinges upon us from several directions throughout our lives. Teachers, officials, superiors, even subordinates and peers—all possess varying degrees of coercive potential.

In our perceptions, we may modify the impact of this pressure by either exaggerating or minimizing it. Nevertheless, the fact remains that others, like us, possess a certain degree of self-assertion and the ability to at least try to impose upon us through sanctions—punishing, rewarding, or withdrawing rewards—or by appealing to our vanity or self-centeredness by admiring us or even beseeching us.

However, the basic thrust of the Qur'an is towards introducing and promulgating a body of norms. This brings home the basic fact that a given social environment is, above all, a normative environment; that rules pervade our lives at every stage; that all societies impinge upon individual consciousness through their normative nets composed of laws, mores, folkways, even fashions and fads. From early childhood until death, we are under the constant reminder that we ought to "behave." The imperative mood of the Qur'an seeks to remind us of a universal strategy that all societies have practiced in order to deter and keep their individual citizens under control, i.e., in line with declared expectations. It is mainly through reminding others and reminding ourselves in terms of these expectations that we, along with others, develop a coercive structure around ourselves.

One significant impact of the normative environment as perceived by us is that we are able to internalize these norms in varying degrees. Internalization of norms has four basic dimensions. First, we are able to uphold them and defend them vocally or otherwise. Second, in case we exempt ourselves from some of the norms some of the time, we seek rationalizations justifying our conduct to ourselves (we develop a conscience). Third, even if we deviate from some of the norms some of the time, we expect others to uphold them and abide by them. And fourth, we are afraid that if we are caught deviating from the prevailing norm(s), others would apply sanctions against us. Thus, social norms are not merely external forces operating around us, for in most cases they coerce us from inside ourselves—we let ourselves be coerced by them voluntarily.

However, reflecting our human nature (*fiṭrah*), which is primarily dilemmatical, societal structure remains internally paradoxical. On the one hand, we have a tendency to compete with one another for those resources which we think we need, even if this means acquiring more than our "fair" share in the opinion of others. On the other hand, experiencing and fearing the disruptive potential of such strivings, we try to put these under normative controls. One tendency is clearly disruptive while the other is clearly unifying in nature, but both stem from our original makeup. Both are, therefore, universal to human society. Let us call these: 1) *competitive structures* reflecting the self-promoting materialistic rivalry among individuals, and 2) *concensual structures* reflecting the tendency to organize in order to contain any disruption which might occur due to mutual rivalry and envy.

Competitive Structures: Our inherent materialistic self-centeredness leads us to compete against others for scarce resources. In fact, competition occurs even when resources are in abundance. However, competition, when and where it occurs, has at least two major consequences. First, it promotes inequality which, when harnessed through the norms, allows vertical mobility. Second, continued competition, if unchecked, invariably leads to conflict. This, in turn, side-tracks norms or leads some to create norms which curtail vertical mobility, thus enhancing inequality and giving it structure. This structured inequality is what is otherwise known as social stratification, or several aggregates of people arranged in a vertical order according to more or less similar episodes of relative success in these conflict-ridden strivings. In its acute form, this process leads to a caste-like structure which tends to stabilize itself by creating new norms aimed at severely limiting free access to competition itself.

The foremost factor in social inequality is our economic striving—the effort to acquire and accumulate what we feel to be sufficient material resources to satisfy our primary needs for survival (i.e., food, clothing, and shelter). With the growing complexity of our society, we may further add to this list things such as means of transportation, communication, information, and leisure. Inequality would appear even if individuals competed with one another to acquire only enough resources to meet their needs. In this case, competition would give equal opportunity for vertical mobility to all comers and would result in a not-too-wide gap between the very rich and the very poor. However, material success often has a high probability of promoting success potential further as well as provoking self-centered materialism among the successful. For those who are too caught up in it, economic success gives them both economic power as well as the motivation to succeed further until acquisition of material resources becomes an obsession—an end in itself. When and where this situation arises, there soon appears a growing gap between the very rich and the very poor, although the real victim in this case is the other crucial aspect of human nature—spiritual altruism.

Such obsessions lead to other dire consequences as well. First, to succeed in economic competition at any cost has often meant bending, circumventing, and even breaking the norms governing competition—a situation that transforms competition into a situation of conflict. This situation of conflict does not mean merely deviating from the norms of competition. More seriously, it means compromising those norms by both cultivating proximity to and courting favors from those in power as well as seeking political power in order to add one more dimension to their already existing economic power.

Second, political power becomes an additional factor of high potency in social inequality. This does not mean that economic obsession necessarily leads to political power or that economic aggrandizement is the only route

to political power in society. On the contrary, economic power may grow without any political ambitions and vice versa. However, when political power combines with economic power, both seem to reinforce each other; success in one leads to success in the other. With this achieved, one's acquisitive ability is multiplied. The individual may gain an enhanced advantage over others in sexual dealings—have the very best choice in mate selection, or have the ability to flout rules governing sexual interaction. In addition, success in both the economic and political spheres of activity often engenders feelings of envy and awe in others. They may begin to look up to such an individual and make him/her a part of their "reference" structure. In short, the person in question may gain in prestige.

Third, economic and political achievement, or failure in achieving them, may quickly create internal ecological or spatial segregation in the population. What is significant about this ecological segregation of several aggregates is the emergence of physical as well as social distance among them. Because of such distances, these aggregates become inwardly oriented and give rise to an interactional density which eventually causes the creation of a class subculture—a way of life with its own subsidiary symbols, values, and norms. Above all, it is the class subculture which draws lines and separates classes and, in so doing, gives social inequality an identifiable structure.

Within any given subculture pertaining to any class or strata, its norms remain a potent force impinging upon one's consciousness, determining his/her class status, and directing the parameters of his/her behavior. These parameters of behavior are those *class roles* which people play in terms of their class status vis-à-vis such specifics as education, profession, marriage, divorce, child rearing, political participation, and consumption. Far from representing a conspiracy on the part of any class participants, these class roles are based on the values generated by the class subculture over time, and different agencies of socialization—family, schools, places of worship, clubs, pubs, coffee houses, and one's peers—transmit these values to each individual.

Once established, class subculture does not merely draw lines between or among classes; it promotes class-ethnocentrism, thus creating a climate of mutual alienation and suspicion between and among classes. In addition, it thwarts vertical mobility by monopolizing resources and skills (Stark 1985, 248), by providing the criteria for "proper" behavior and the rules of endogamy and commensality, and by socializing and educating the coming generations (Matras 1975, 169). Thus, children of relatively highly-placed parents are at an initial advantage psychologically, educationally, and materially when it comes to at least maintaining their class status.

But, does this mean that human society is nothing but a number of subsocieties with their own respective norms, all hopelessly divided and feuding among themselves for the accumulation of material resources and class self-

interest? Far from it, for the *competitive structures* that divide society in vertically arranged segments are threaded across the whole spectrum by the *consensual structure* which stitches these segments together into one whole and gives them unity. Above all, it gives society its characterizing insignia.

Consensual Structure: This term is used to define a number of distinct but interrelated and interdependent constellations of interaction as governed by the norms leading towards meeting crucial individual and collective needs. The Qur'an alludes to four such patterns of collective activity. Generally known as social institutions in sociology and anthropology, these are economy, family, polity, and worship. Of these, economy refers to standardized collective behavior aimed at acquiring food, shelter, clothing, and all other needs deemed necessary for survival. Family is a form of activity which regulates sexual needs and legitimizes the resulting offspring. Polity legitimizes power and authority, thus providing social control, and worship, whether individual or collective, provides a normative pattern of communion between man and the supernatural.

Throughout the course of history, human society has developed other institutions as well, such as education and recreation. These institutions are not universal to human society, however, and are therefore not fundamental to it. Only four institutions, according to the Qur'an, are also empirically fundamental to human society. They are the least common denominators of human society, regardless of their specific form in time and place. Together, they give form to a specific society so that even social inequality assumes a specific class or caste structure depending upon how these institutions are put into collective practice. Certainly, both Marx and Weber may be read as searching for this relationship between prevailing social institutions and social inequality.

Social norms, whether legal or extralegal (i.e., folkways, mores, customs), not only define the dimensions of these institutions, but it is mainly through these institutions that these norms tighten the regulatory mechanism around individual human behavior in society. As elaborate as class subcultural norms may be, very rarely does a given class subculture transgress these interclass institutional norms. For instance, in the case of marriage it does not matter which class an individual belongs to—if he/she does not marry according to certain rules, it will not be considered marriage. Likewise, upper-class individuals as well as those in the lower strata of society must pray following certain formalities if they want their prayers to be valid. Even in a multi-ethnic society where members of an ethnic group may be divided into a number of classes, norms, especially those of marriage and worship, do not vary in their essentials from one class to another.

These acts of praying, politicking, marrying, divorcing, buying or selling, when performed according to the given institutional prescriptions, are

designated *institutional roles* as distinct from *class roles*. These institutional roles are determined by the institutional norms, for they help to maintain the principal configurations of their respective institutions. As individuals start deviating from their institutional role requirements or as the requirements begin to undergo a process of change, institutional forms also change.

This means that as members of society, we play two different sets of roles—class roles and institutional roles. These roles are not merely different in origin, but, paradoxically, they are functionally opposing, for while class roles tend to set people apart in different aggregates, institutional roles give them a common heritage and a sense of shared ideology. While class roles reflect envy, competition, and conflict among people, institutional roles have the potential of containing these otherwise explosive roles. While class roles are only segmental, as they have a relatively limited applicability, institutional roles are generally more applicable to the task of providing a national identity.

Social Action and Social Structure

Apparently, we are now facing a dilemma. On the one hand, we see that human action is willful and indeterministic. On the other hand, we find that society directs role playing through its class and institutional structures. We also see that the dilemmatical nature of human beings causes them to make their own decision as to what to do, and when and how to do it. But, we see that despite our impulsive and willful character, most of the time we remain involved in role-playing according to the dictates of the existing social structure. Whether we are at home with our family members or at the workplace with our colleagues, and whether we are buying, selling, attending classes, or doing homework in the library, we are acting so as to fulfill the role requirements by which others expect us to abide. How can we solve this dilemma? Clearly, this question calls for an explanation of the relationship between a given social structure, which tends to be deterministic, and an individual action, which tends to be indeterministic.

Small Groups

Typically, human society is so large, and our capacity to interact with all or even most of its members so limited, that we cannot but interact with only one or a few individuals at a time. That which we call "society," then, is nothing more than a population divided into several such interactional processes in a given territory.

In our interaction with others, we may encounter our spouses and children

at home, our colleagues at work, waiters and waitresses in restaurants, bank tellers in banks, or food store cashiers. Evidently, some of these interactions are rather limited in scope. For instance, our interaction with a bank teller hardly takes more than a few minutes at best. Even if we go to the same bank on a regular basis, we do not necessarily see or insist upon seeing the same teller. We have no interaction with the same teller beyond those few minutes of talking with him/her across the counter. We do not identify ourselves with that person except in a rather remote sense. On the other hand, there are others with whom we do not merely interact, but with whom we relate and identify ourselves. As we see them more frequently than others, we have relationships of a relatively more enduring nature with them. We share common goals and objectives with them and, while interacting with them, we not only follow the larger societal norms, but we give them more specific structures and even develop a distinct body of norms directing our interaction specifically with them. When two or more people are involved in such a relationship, they formulate a group. Such manner groups assume two major forms—primary and secondary. Primary groups (Cooley 1908) provide us with a degree of informality, intimacy, and social support. Interaction with members of such groups is often an end in itself rather than a means to some other ends. Family, juvenile buddies, play groups, and other close acquaintances are examples of such groups. Secondary groups, on the other hand, are characterized by relatively more formal and even recurrent relationships. Our colleagues at work are those with whom we entertain secondary relationships. Whether primary or secondary, group interaction consists of actors who are, to use symbolic interactionist terminology, mutually "significant others."

When social interaction leads to the formulation of a group, it serves as a buffer as well as a medium between the individual and his/her society at large. Sociologists from Simmel and Cooley to Stouffer, Merton and a number of criminologists such as Cohen, Cloward and Ohlin and Matza, as well as some notable social psychologists such as Allport, Sherif, and Asch, have all been intrigued by group dynamics which, on a day-to-day basis, seem to be more important for the individual in society than the society as a whole.

The significance of a small group arises from the fact that it shields the individual by deflecting, refracting, and modifying the various societal influences which would otherwise impinge upon him/her directly. This shielding, in effect, allows the individual a great deal of leeway in playing his/her institutional or class roles. Groups to which one belongs may implicitly or explicitly tolerate, even encourage, deviant roles among their individual members by providing them with a vocabulary of rationalizations (Sykes and Matza 1957; Matza 1964). Primary groups with a high degree of informal

interaction and intimacy (one's peer group and even one's family, which is considered to be the harbinger of societal values), often go out of their way to protect their members from society-imposed sanctions. Even secondary groups such as bureaucracies, which Weber describes as supposedly operating on the basis of formal rules and impersonal criteria, are invariably penetrated by informal and personal relationships. To the extent that this is true, bureaucratic rules are put aside, bent, and even broken by the very bureaucrats who are supposed to uphold them. The military coup has its origin in a conspiracy among a few officer "buddies" who have a great deal of confidence in one another (Ba-Yunus 1975). Likewise factory workers, who are supposed to follow certain formal norms of production, coalesce to develop their own norms of production (Homans 1950, 60-64).

Groups, then, must not be confused as being microcosms or small replicas of their respective societies. They are rather the smallest interactional segments in a given society, and are also overlapping and very dynamic and changeable in character. Although operating within the institutional and class structure of a given society, they provide their members with a great deal of freedom of action.

Role Making

All societies change. Some change only slowly and gradually, while others change at a breathtaking pace. Some only evolve over time, while others face explosive change in the form of revolutions. Our discussion of groups provides some clues as to where the seeds of change may germinate in a given society. By providing varying degrees of latitude to individual action and expression, deviant or otherwise, groups knowingly or unknowingly encourage and accommodate innovation—the root cause of social change. Since people belong to more than one group at the same time, innovation can be transmitted from one group to several groups.

There are two forms of social change which take root at the group level. We may call them *conformative dynamics* and *infractive dynamics.*

Conformative dynamics refers to intrarole variation which pertains to our specific act while performing a role. These specific role-fulfilling acts always shift in time and space in a given individual, and from one individual to another, without necessarily transgressing the broader dimensions of the role in question. These new acts are what Mead was interested in and what Parsons chose to ignore. These acts are the building blocks of any role playing, and they therefore deserve our attention in their own right. When one acts in the performance of a role, this is what Turner calls role making, namely, that even if the role requirements are determined by the social structure,

the roles themselves are acted out in an indeterministic manner.

Role making should mean that we seldom perform the same act while acting in the same role at different times. Roles that we perform as social actors have innumerable and as yet uncharted possibilities of variation. It is not difficult to see what we mean. For example, while playing the role of a professor, the individual may not act in exactly the same manner in two different sections of the same course. Colleagues teaching other sections of the same course may not have the same classroom performance as that particular professor. Likewise, in the status of a husband or a wife, he/she may play an appropriate role at home, but not always in the same manner. While playing the role of a goalie in a soccer match, he/she may engage in such raw acts as twisting and turning, or jumping forward or backward in an otherwise laughable manner. But the audience does not laugh at him/her, because they view the goalie's acts in their role context. Even an Egyptian *kabāb* seller in downtown Cairo does not act out his role in the same manner with every customer.

All of these instances are examples of quick changes in time and space affected by a given person while playing the same role. It is more appropriate to call these quick changes *variations*. However these variations, like variations in weather which often betray climatic changes, may be in the vanguard of more telling social change when they are shared and adopted by others in the group and then transferred by them to other groups. This gives these variations a semblance of stability, and a new pattern of social interaction is in the offing. To illustrate, the Islamic code of sexual modesty requires Muslim men and women not to enter into sexual role relationships with a person who is not one's spouse. Among the Pakistani urban middle class, this had come to mean that young unmarried Muslims are prohibited from seeing their future spouses. Nonetheless, as urban women started going to college in increasing numbers and started to work outside of their homes, they also showed an interest in eligible young bachelors. It is now reported (Ahmed 1985) that no sooner is an engagement performed than the would-be marital partners not only see each other at college or the workplace, but also at the home of the would-be bride's parents, although they are still not allowed to go out on dates. It seems that marriage in Pakistan is still arranged. However, the principles connected with the Islamic practice of strict *ḥijāb* (modesty) before marriage have changed over time. As long as unwed Pakistanis are not going out on dates with their potential spouses, they are still well within the role expectation of sexual modesty, regardless of whether they see each other in public or under the loving but watchful eyes of their parents. Thus, although these unwed Pakistanis have adopted a new pattern which brings them uncomfortably closer to the forbidden area, by and large they are still within the bounds of the Islamic code which governs sexual role

playing in Pakistian. It would be only a small leap, but a very serious leap indeed, should they decide to cross these structural limitations.

In short, social change may occur without necessarily transgressing institutional or class role expectations. We see that televangelism has now appeared in America as a new way of preaching without bringing about any denominational change. A society's view of the suitable age for marriage may change without the norms governing marriage changing. Bureaucratic changes may occur in public administration without necessarily changing the overall political structure, and agricultural practices may become more scientific without changing the broader role expectations of farmers.

As mentioned above, such changes are rooted in variations of raw action committed mostly in the accommodating confines of small groups, but over time they come to be shared by many individuals across the group spectrum of the society in question. However, the root cause of such variations is the very indeterministic and willful character of the individual actor who, in shaping his/her act, remains too mercurial to be dictated to by an otherwise rather dictating social structure.

Infractive dynamics, on the other hand, originates in role making which transgresses established role expectations. In the above example, if Pakistani women started going out on dates with their suitors, this would constitute a change which would shake the very roots of the traditional family in Pakistan. Should there be only a few isolated people indulging in this act, it might be possible to contain the potential effects of such a change. If, on the other hand, it were to spread across several groups, control mechanisms would have to be implemented before this undesirable practice could be fully contained. During the late 1960s, American young men and women, while protesting American involvement in Vietnam, rebelled against almost the entire established order, including the one governing marriage and sexual acts. The movement itself spread so quickly and became so widely diffused, especially among college students, that it caught the economic, political, and religious sectors of American society completely off guard. Consequently, these days we hear of a "new morality" and "alternative life styles." This "new morality" is what constitutes infractive dynamics, for it is a transgression of the traditional social norms on the part of the American youth, and has resulted in changes which have been begrudgingly accommodated in the social structure.

Examples of infractive dynamics are legion. When Myrdal and Dorai and Chugh write about widespread corruption in India's public bureaucracies, they are pointing out a somewhat resigned public acceptance of infractive practices throughout the economic and political institutions of Indian society. This is how abortion was legalized in America during the 1970s. Likewise, the drug problem has become so serious in America that some highly-placed individuals within the American social structure have proposed decriminalizing

some or maybe even all of the drugs which are now stated to be illegal.

Infractive dynamics, like intrarole or conformative dynamics, is universal to human society, for it is an inherent aspect of, and thus normal and natural to, human nature. However, as the above examples suggest, infractive changes occur more frequently in situations of rapid technological change which, as world history has shown, generates demographic mobility and urbanization. As people start flocking around new technical centers, a high degree of heterogeneity and anonymity appears in these densely populated areas. Given such a situation, the probability is relatively much higher for the emergence of infractive dynamics, for this new social milieu allows strangers to transgress their traditional ancestral norms and even newly-instituted laws and statutes by providing them with opportunities to remain anonymous or to melt into the crowd. Moreover, the development of new tools, whether they be bicycles, horse-drawn carriages, automobiles, radios, televisions, or sewing machines, brings about new tastes and demands and, while they quickly become status symbols, they also give birth to the race for material acquisition which, in turn, leads to normative conflict. This situation, when and where it develops, promotes a tilt towards self-centered pragmatism while defying any internalization of the prevailing norms.

While intrarole deviance may raise a few eyebrows, however, the transgression of role expectations is a serious matter. Even so, such behavior persists in a given society, a reminder of its inherent dilemmatical nature, and of the fact that most people personally remain less than fully committed to their society's norms. When individuals want to accomplish an objective, they generally look for legal or normative avenues to reach their goals. If and when they perceive that legal or normative avenues are not available or are too cumbersome, then, depending upon the strength of their motivation to achieve their objectives, they may consider the possibility of deviant behavior. Indeed for the uncommitted, the very perception that an opportunity exists becomes the motivation to commit a deviant act. In short, it may be safely hypothesized that deviant acts develop out of a high degree of desire, a low degree of commitment to existing norms, and a high degree of perceived opportunity. This implies that the degree of commitment to social norms is an effective internal buffer which correlates negatively with deviance by rejecting the perceived opportunity and even by containing the motivation itself. However, in situations where opportunities for deviance abound, a high level of commitment to the norms does need some deliberate cultivation.

This perspective shows that deviants are not deviant by nature; there is usually nothing wrong with them psychologically, physically, economically or otherwise. On account of this, we cannot neatly divide society into categories of deviants and conformists. Indeed, throughout human history there have been many who acted against the prevailing norms not necessarily for personal

gain, but in order to fight against what they considered to be unjust norms, or the high-handedness of the authorities.

In any case, before deviant behavior could create any semblance of accommodation in a society still adhering to its legal or extralegal norms, it would invariably meet with resistance or a negative reaction, at least on the part of some individuals or segments of the society. Depending upon the severity of deviance, there might even be a widespread sentiment among these segments that such "antisocial" characters must pay for their "misdeeds" (retribution), that they and other potential perpetrators should be taught a "lesson" (deterrence), and that they should be isolated from others (incarceration) and, if possible, "corrected" or "rehabilitated." As if this societal reaction were not enough, social stigma continues to stick in varying degrees even after the individual has atoned for his/her action. That these societal responses, either singly or in combination with each other, have so far failed to eradicate role deviance speaks for the persistence with which we humans keep our deviant options open in our society. In general, because of the possibility of a negative societal reaction, most acts of infraction are committed in situations which provide opportunities for escaping notice or defying apprehension. In either case, a group, whether it be a family, a juvenile gang, professional shoplifters or close friends in powerful places, plays a significant role in shielding an individual from apprehension or any other negative consequences in case he/she is caught. From shoplifting to military conspiracy (Ba-Yunus 1975), individuals who transgress role expectations often end up facing rather dire consequences if they have no strong group support to fight for them.

Resistance to role infraction takes time to soften and accommodate what is otherwise known as social deviance. Infractive dynamics, then, is a rather slow and gradual process. Acts of infraction in search of material gain (i.e., the accumulation of wealth, the acquisition of power, indulgence in sex, the pursuit of fame or any combination thereof) are reflections of the self-seeking materialist element in the original makeup of human beings. It never completely exhausts itself, although it could be successfully suppressed by altruistic commitments and by others afraid of being caught and sanctioned. Over and above this, the dual nature of human beings means that this materialistic element is constantly watched by its spiritual counterpart.

However, this materialistic pull, as gradual and persistent as it may be, is not the only source of social change. The spiritual element in the human makeup which keeps such materialism in check always remains loath to and protests any excessive materialistic tilt and injustice in society. In every society and era, there are individuals who have not only controlled their own materialistic tendencies, but who have continued to protest what they consider to be very exploitative situations. This perceived exploitation does not have

to be economic in nature only, for the spheres of politics and power, the family and even worship are not immune.

When such protesters become too noisy and threatening, most of the time they are quickly eliminated or subdued by an informal or formal reaction on the part of their society. However, there comes a time when these challenges to the prevailing system are heard more intently and by a larger number of groups who may be suffering from acute cases of anomie (Merton 1937) and relative deprivation in a normative structure which they consider to be very unjust. The task at hand is to destroy the existing normative structure and then to replace it with another. As disaffected individuals start flocking to the call of these challengers, it becomes possible to organize a revolutionary movement. Briefly, there are four main ingredients of such revolutionary upheavals: 1) a situation of substantial unrealized aspirations (relative deprivation), 2) emergence of a vocal challenger, 3) a larger number (not necessarily a majority) of responsive groups, and 4) a group of adept and innovative organizers dedicated to the caller or the challenger. These four elements are equally necessary requirements for bringing about revolutionary change. Together, they describe a process which culminates in the emergence of charisma as bestowed upon the challenger by his/her followers. On the surface, it appears that large crowds of protesting people are the most important factor in bringing about revolutionary change. However, such crowds do not appear for no reason, nor do they assemble spontaneously. In order to activate them, it is important that certain structural conditions exist. If these do not exist, the caller has to create a perception that they do exist, and his/her organizers must penetrate and appeal to several groups which people belong to in their daily lives.

Charismatic upheavals must be distinguished from other revolutionary changes that occur due to an accommodation of widespread and persisting deviance, such as the new morality in America. Charismatic revolutions are almost invariably aimed at the political nerve center which controls and supports the existing normative structure. Because of this limited focus, such upheavals may still fail due to countermeasures taken by the political elites and those with vested interests in preserving the existing status quo. However, even if the movement fails, seeds of change do not die as long as the structural conditions remain unchanged.

The Qur'an is full of such revolutionary episodes. Several prophets of Allah, from Nūḥ, Ibrāhīm, Mūsā, to ʿĪsā and Muhammad (may peace be upon all of them) were above all protesters, challengers, and callers for revolutionary change. All of them were charismatic leaders whose charisma still mystifies a large part of humanity even today. In fact, the Qur'anic accounts of the prophets may teach a few lessons to those sociologists who are interested in analyzing charismatic growth and revolutionary change in society.

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