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**Man in Society**

At a certain age children are greatly intrigued by the possibility of locating themselves on a map. It appears strange that one's familiar life should actually have all occurred in an area delineated by a set of quite impersonal (and hitherto unfamiliar) coordinates on the surface of a map. The child's exclamations of 'I was there' and 'I am here right now' betray the astonishment that the place of last summer's vacation, a place marked in memory by such sharply personal events as the ownership of one's first dog or the secret assembling of a collection of worms, should have specific latitudes and longitudes devised by strangers to one's dog, one's worms, and oneself... One participates in the real world of grown-ups by having an address...

What interests us at the moment is the way in which such location tells an individual just what he may do and what he can expect of life. To be located in society means to be at the intersection of specific special forces. Commonly one ignores these forces at one's peril. One moves within society within carefully defined systems of power and prestige. And once one knows how to locate oneself, one also knows that there is not an awful lot that one can do about this...

[T]he common-sense view of society understands this. The sociologist does not contradict this understanding. He sharpens it, analyzes its roots, sometimes either modifies or extends it. We shall see later that sociological perspective finally goes beyond the common-sense understanding of 'the system' and our captivity in it. But in most specific social situations that the sociologist sets out to analyze he will find little reason to quarrel with the notion that 'they' are in charge. On the contrary, 'they' will loom larger and in more pervasive fashion over our lives than we thought before the sociological analysis. This aspect of sociological perspective can be clarified by looking at two important areas of investigation – social control and social stratification.

Social control... refers to the various means used by a society to bring its recalcitrant members back into line. No society can exist without social control... It is possible, then, to perceive oneself as standing at the centre (that is, at the point of maximum pressure) of a set of concentric circles, each representing a system of social control. The outer ring might well represent the legal and political system under which one is obligated to live. This is the system that, quite against one's will, will tax one, draft one into the military, make one obey its innumerable rules and regulations, if need be put one in prison, and in the last resort will kill one. One does not have to be a right-wing Republican to be perturbed by the ever-increasing expansion of this system's power into every conceivable aspect of one's life. A salutary exercise would be to note down for the span of a single week all the occasions, including fiscal ones, in which one came up against the demands of the politico-legal system...

Another system of social control that exerts its pressures towards the solitary figure in the centre is that of morality, custom, and manners. Only the most urgent-seeming (to the authorities, that is) aspects of this system are endowed with legal sanctions. This does not mean, however, that one can safely be immoral, eccentric, or unmannered. At this point all the other instrumentalities of social control go into action. Immorality is punished by loss of one's job, eccentricity by the loss of one's chances of finding a new one, bad manners by remaining uninvited and uninvitable in the groups that respect what they consider good manners.

Unemployment and loneliness may be minor penalties compared to being dragged away by the cops, but they may not actually appear so to the individuals thus punished. Extreme defiance against the *mores* [strict moral norms] of our particular society, which is quite sophisticated in its control apparatus, may lead to yet another consequence – that of being defined, by common consent, as ‘sick’.

But in addition to these broad coercive systems that every individual shares with vast numbers of fellow controllees, there are other and less extensive circles of control to which he is subjected. His choice of an occupation... the informal controls imposed by colleagues and co-workers... one’s other social involvements... Finally, the human group in which one’s so-called private life occurs, that is the circle of one’s family and personal friends, also constitutes a control system. It would be a grave error to assume that this is necessarily the weakest of them all just because it does not possess the formal means of coercion of some of the other control systems. It is in this circle that an individual normally has his most important social ties. Disapproval, loss of prestige, ridicule or contempt in this intimate group has far more serious psychological weight than the same reactions encountered elsewhere. It may be economically disastrous if one’s boss finally concludes that one is a worthless nobody, but the psychological effect of such a judgment is incomparably more devastating if one discovered that one’s wife has arrived at the same conclusion...

If we return once more to the picture of an individual located at the centre of a set of concentric circles, each one representing a system of social control, we can understand a little better that location in society means to locate oneself with regard to many forces that constrain and coerce one. The individual who, thinking consecutively of all the people he is in a position to have to please, from the Collector of Internal Revenue to his mother-in-law, gets the idea that all of society sits right on top of him, had better not dismiss that idea as a momentary neurotic derangement. The sociologist, at any rate, is likely to strengthen him in this conception, no matter what other counsellors may tell him to snap out of it.

Another important area of sociological analysis that may serve to explicate the full meaning of location in society is that of social stratification. The concept of stratification refers to the fact that any society will consist of levels that relate to each other in terms of superordination and subordination, be it in power, privilege or prestige. To say this more simply, stratification means that every society has a system of ranking. Some strata rank higher, some lower. Their sum constitutes the stratification system of that particular society.

Stratification theory is one of the most complex sectors of sociological thought... The most important type of stratification in contemporary Western society is the class system... [T]here are other stratification systems that are far more rigid and therefore far more determinative of an individual’s entire life than that of class. In American society a notable example of this is the racial system...

A commonly used concept in sociology is that of the definition of the situation. First coined by the American sociologist W.I. Thomas, it means that a social situation *is* what it is defined to be by its participants. In other words, for the sociologist’s purposes reality is a matter of definition. This is why the sociologist must analyze earnestly many facets of human conduct that are in themselves absurd or delusional. In the example of the racial system just given, a biologist or physical anthropologist may take one look at the racial beliefs of white Southerners and declare that these beliefs are totally erroneous. He can dismiss them as but another mythology produced by human ignorance and ill will, pack up his things and go home. The sociologist’s task, however, only begins at this point. It does not help at all for him to dismiss the

Southern racial ideology as a scientific imbecility. Many social situations are effectively controlled by the definitions of imbeciles. Indeed, the imbecility that defines the situation is part of the stuff of sociological analysis. Thus the sociologist's operational understanding of 'reality' is a somewhat peculiar one... For the moment it is merely important to point out that the inexorable controls by which social location determines our lives are not done away with by debunking the ideas that undergird these controls.

Nor is this the whole story. Our lives are not only dominated by the inanities of our contemporaries, but also by those of men who have been dead for generations... As Alfred Schutz has pointed out, this means that each social situation in which we find ourselves is not only defined by our contemporaries but predefined by our ancestors, their ill-conceived constructions are commonly more difficult to get rid of than those built in our own lifetime. This fact is caught in Fontenelle's aphorism that the dead are more powerful than the living....

Most of the time the game has been 'fixed' long before we arrive on the scene... We can now arrive at a more sophisticated understanding of social structures. A useful sociological concept on which to base this understanding is that of 'institution'. An institution is commonly defined as a distinctive complex of social actions. Thus we can speak of the law, of class, marriage or organized religion as constituting institutions... Arnold Gehlen, a contemporary German social scientist... conceives of an institution as a regulatory agency, channeling human actions in much the same way as instincts channel animal behaviour. In other words, institutions provide procedures through which human conduct is patterned, compelled to go, in grooves deemed desirable by society. And this trick is performed by making these grooves appear to the individual as the only possible ones.

Let us take an example... [M]arriage is not an instinct but an institution. Yet the way it leads behaviour into predetermined channels is very similar to what the instincts do where they hold sway... For this imperative... our young man was not born with. It was instilled in him by society, reinforced by the countless pressures of family lore, moral education, religion, the mass media and advertising... This becomes obvious if we try to imagine what our young man would do in the absence of the institutional imperative...

Society confronts us as an objective facticity. It is *there*, something that cannot be denied and that must be reckoned with. Society is external to ourselves. It surrounds us, encompasses our life on all sides. We are *in* society, located in specific sectors of the social system. This location predetermines and predefines almost everything we do, from language to etiquette, from the religious beliefs we hold to the probability that we will commit suicide. Our wishes are not taken into consideration in this matter of social location, and our intellectual resistance to what society prescribes or proscribes avails very little at best, and frequently nothing. Society, as objective and external fact, confronts us especially in the form of coercion. Its institutions pattern our actions and even shape our expectations. They reward us to the extent that we stay within our assigned performances. If we step out of those assignments, society has at its disposal an almost infinite variety of controlling and coercing agencies... Finally, we are located in society not only in space but in time. Our society is an historical entity that extends temporally beyond any individual biography. Society antedates us and it will survive us. It was there before we were born and it will be there after we are dead. Our lives are but episodes in its majestic march through time. In sum, society is the walls of our imprisonment in history.

## **Society in Man**

For most of us the yoke of society seems easy to bear. Why? Certainly not because the power of society is less than we indicated....

We speak of an ideology when a certain idea serves a vested interest in society. Very frequently, though not always, ideologies systematically distort social reality in order to come out where it is functional for them to do so. In looking at the control systems set up by occupational groups we have already seen the way in which ideologies can legitimate the activities of such groups. Ideological thinking, however, is capable of covering much larger human collectivities. For example, the racial mythology of the American South serves to legitimate a social system practised by millions of human beings. The ideology of 'free enterprise' serves to camouflage the monopolistic practices of large American corporations whose only common characteristic with the old-style entrepreneur is a steadfast readiness to defraud the public. The Marxist ideology, in turn, serves to legitimate the tyranny practised by the Communist Party apparatus whose interests have about as much in common with Karl Marx's as those of Elmer Gantry had with the Apostle Paul's. In each case, the ideology both justifies what is done by the group whose vested interest is served and interprets social reality in such a way that the justification is made plausible. This interpretation often appears bizarre to an outsider who 'does not understand the problem' (that is, who does not share the vested interest). The Southern racist must simultaneously maintain that white women have a profound revulsion at the very thought of sexual relations with a Negro and that the slightest inter-racial sociability will straightaway lead to such sexual relations. And the corporation executive will maintain that his activities to fix prices are undertaken in defence of a free market. And the Communist Party official will have a way of explaining that the limitation of electoral choice to candidates approved by the party is an expression of true democracy.

It should be stressed again in this connexion that commonly the people putting forth these propositions are perfectly sincere. The moral effort to lie deliberately is beyond most people. It is much easier to deceive oneself. It is, therefore, important to keep the concept of ideology distinct from notions of lying, deception, propaganda or legerdemain [trickery, sleight of hand]. The liar, by definition, knows that he is lying. The ideologist does not. It is not our concern at this point to ask which of the two is ethically superior. We only stress once more the unreflected and unplanned way in which society normally operates. Most theories of conspiracy grossly over-estimate the intellectual foresight of the conspirators.

The individual, then, derives his world view socially in very much the same way that he derives his roles and his identity. In other words, his emotions and his self-interpretation like his actions are predefined for him by society, and so is his cognitive approach to the universe that surrounds him. This fact Alfred Schutz has caught in his phrase 'world-taken-for-granted' – the system of apparently self-evident and self-validating assumptions about the world that each society engenders in the course of its history. This socially determined world view is, at least in part, already given in the language used by the society. Certain linguists may have exaggerated the importance of this factor alone in creating any given world view, but there can be little doubt that one's language at least helps to shape one's relationship to reality. And, of course, our language is not chosen by ourselves but imposed upon us by the particular social group that is in charge of our initial socialization. Society predefines for us that fundamental symbolic apparatus with which we grasp the world, order our experience and interpret our own existence.

In the same way, society supplies our values, our logic and the store of information (or, for that matter, misinformation) that constitutes our 'knowledge'. Very few people, and even

they only in regard to fragments of this world view, are in a position to re-evaluate what has thus been imposed on them. They actually feel no need for reappraisal because the world view into which they have been socialized appears self-evident to them. Since it is also so regarded by almost everyone they are likely to deal with in their own society, the world view is self-validating. Its 'proof' lies in the reiterated experiences of other men who take it for granted also. To put this perspective of the sociology of knowledge into one succinct proposition: Reality is socially constructed. In this proposition, the sociology of knowledge helps to round out Thomas's statement on the power of the social definition and throws further light on the sociological picture of the precarious nature of reality.

We have singled out some strands of sociological thought that present us with a picture of society existing within man, adding to our previous perspective on man within society. At this point, our picture of society as a great prison no longer seems satisfactory, unless we add to it the detail of groups of prisoners busily keeping its walls intact. Our imprisonment in society now appears as something affected as much from within ourselves as by the operation of external forces. A more adequate representation of social reality now would be the puppet theatre, with the curtain rising on the little puppets jumping about on the ends of their invisible strings, cheerfully acting out the little parts that have been assigned to them in the tragi-comedy to be enacted. The analogy, however, does not go far enough. The Pierrot of the puppet theatre has neither will nor consciousness. But the Pierrot of the social stage wants nothing more than the fate awaiting him in the scenario – and he has a whole system of philosophy to prove it.

The key term used by sociologists to refer to the phenomena discussed in this chapter is that of internalization. What happens in socialization is that the social world is internalized within the child. The same process, though perhaps weaker in quality, occurs every time the adult is initiated into a new social context or a new social group. Society, then, is not only something 'out there', in the Durkheimian sense, but it is also 'in here', part of our innermost being. Only an understanding of internalization makes sense of the incredible fact that most external controls work most of the time for most of the people in a society. Society not only controls our movements, but shapes our identity, our thought and our emotions. The structures of society become the structures of our own consciousness. Society does not stop at the surface of our skins. Society penetrates us as much as it envelops us. Our bondage to society is not so much established by conquest as by collusion. Sometimes, indeed, we are crushed into submission. Much more frequently we are entrapped by our own social nature.

The walls of our imprisonment were there before we appeared on the scene, but they are ever rebuilt by ourselves. We are betrayed into captivity with our own cooperation.