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OUT OF UTOPIA: TOWARD A REORIENTATION OF SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This paper first attempts an outline of the common elements of construction in utopian societies. It is claimed that recent theoretical approaches in sociology have tended to analyze social structure in terms of immobility, i.e., have assumed the utopian image of society. The author suggests that overconcern with the social system—in the structural-functionalist approach—has led contemporary sociology to a loss of problem consciousness and urges that a conflict model be adopted for the explanation of sociological problems.

Then I may now proceed to tell you how I feel about the society we have just described. My feelings are much like those of a man who has beheld superb animals in a drawing, or, it may be, in real life, but at rest, and finds himself longing to behold them in motion, executing some feat commensurate with their physique. That is just how I feel about the city we have described.—Socrates in PLATO's *Timaios*.

I

All utopias from Plato's Republic to George Orwell's brave new world of 1984 have had one element of construction in common: they are all societies from which change is absent. Whether conceived as a final state and climax of historical development, as an intellectual's nightmare, or as a romantic dream, the social fabric of utopias does not, and perhaps cannot, recognize the unending flow of the historical process.¹ For the sociologist it would be an intellectual experiment both rewarding and entertaining to try and trace in, say, the totalitarian universe of 1984 potential sources of conflict and change and to predict the directions of change indicated in Big Brother's society. Its originator, of course, did not do this: his utopia would not make sense unless it was

more than a passing phase of social development.

It is no accident that the catchwords of Huxley's Brave New World—"Community,

¹ There are very many utopian constructions, particularly in recent decades. Since these vary considerably, it is doubtful whether any generalization can apply to all of them. I have tried to be careful in my generalizations on this account and to generalize without reservation only where I feel this can be defended. Thus I am prepared to argue the initial thesis of this paper even against such assertions as H. G. Wells's: "The Modern Utopia must not be static but kinetic, must shape not as a permanent state but as a hopeful stage, leading to a long ascent of stages" (*A Modern Utopia* [London: T. Nelson & Sons, 1909], chap. i, sec. 1). It seems to me that the crucial distinction to make here is that between intra-system processes, i.e., changes that are actually part of the design of utopia, and historical change, the direction and outcome of which is not predetermined.

Identity, Stability"—could be applied with equal justice to most other utopian constructions. Utopian societies have (to use a term popular in contemporary sociological analysis) certain structural requisites; they must display certain features in order to be what they purport to be. First, utopias do not grow out of familiar reality following realistic patterns of development. For most authors, utopias have but a nebulous past and no future; they are suddenly there, and there to stay, suspended in mid-time or, rather, somewhere beyond the ordinary notions of time. Our own society is, for the citizens of 1984, hardly more than a fading memory. Moreover, there is an unexplained gap, a kind of mutation somewhere between 1948 and 1984, interpreted in the light of arbitrary and permanently adapted "documents" prepared by the Ministry of Truth. The case of Marx is even more pertinent. It is well known how much time and energy Lenin spent in trying to link the realistically possible event of the proletarian revolution with the image of a Communist society in which there are no classes, no conflicts, no state, and, indeed, no division of labor. Lenin, as we know, failed, in theory as in practice, to get beyond the "dictatorship of the proletariat," and somehow we are not surprised at that. It is hard to link, by rational argument or empirical analysis, the wide river of history—flowing more rapidly at some points, more slowly at others, but always moving—and the tranquil village pond of utopia.

Nor are we surprised that in social reality the "dictatorship of the proletariat" soon turned out to be more and more of the former, involving less and less of the latter.

A second structural characteristic of utopias seems to be the uniformity of such societies or, to use more technical language, the existence of universal consensus on prevailing values and institutional arrangements. This, too, will prove relevant for the explanation of the impressive stability of all utopias. Consensus on values and institutions does not necessarily mean that utopias cannot in some ways be democratic. Consensus can be enforced—as it is for Orwell

—or it can be spontaneous, a kind of *contrat social*—as it is for some eighteenth-century utopian writers, and, if in a perverted way, i.e., by conditioned spontaneity, again for Huxley. One might suspect, on closer inspection, that, from the point of view of political organization, the result would in both cases turn out to be rather similar. But this line of analysis involves critical interpretation and will be postponed for the moment. Suffice it to note that the assumption of universal consensus seems to be built into most utopian constructions and is apparently one of the factors explaining their stability.

Universal consensus means, by implication, absence of structurally generated conflict. In fact, many builders of utopias go to considerable lengths to convince their audience that in their societies conflict about values or institutional arrangements is either impossible or simply unnecessary. Utopias are perfect—be it perfectly agreeable or perfectly disagreeable—and consequently there is nothing to quarrel about. Strikes and revolutions are as conspicuously absent from utopian societies as are parliaments in which organized groups advance their conflicting claims for power. Utopian societies may be and, indeed, often are caste societies; but they are not class societies in which the oppressed revolt against their oppressors. We may note, third, that social harmony seems to be one of the factors adduced to account for utopian stability.²

Some writers add to their constructions a particularly clever touch of realism: they invent an individual who does not conform to the accepted values and ways of life. Orwell's Winston Smith or Huxley's Savage are cases in point—but it is not difficult to imagine a surviving capitalist in Communist society or similar villains of the peace in other utopias. For exigencies of this kind, utopias usually have varied, though effective, means at their disposal to do away with the disturbers of unity. But how did they

² R. Gerber states, in his study of *Utopian Fantasy* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1955): "The most admirably constructed Utopia fails to convince if we are not led to believe that the danger of revolt is excluded" (p. 68).

emerge in the first place? That question is rather more difficult to answer. Characteristically, utopian writers take refuge in chance to carry off this paradox. Their "outsiders" are not (and cannot be) products of the social structure of utopia but deviants, pathological cases infected with some unique disease.

In order to make their constructions at all realistic, utopians must, of course, allow for some activities and processes in their societies. The difference between utopia and a cemetery is that occasionally some things do happen in utopia. But—and this is the fourth point—all processes going on in utopian societies follow recurrent patterns and occur within, and as part of, the design of the whole. Not only do they not upset the status quo: they affirm and sustain it, and it is in order to do so that most utopians allow them to happen at all. For example, most writers have retained the idea that men are mortal, even in utopia.³ Therefore, some provisions have to be made for the reproduction, both physical and social, of society. Sexual intercourse (or at least artificial fertilization), the upbringing and education of children, and selection for social positions have to be secured and regulated—to mention only the minimum of social institutions required simply because men are mortal.⁴ In addition to this, most utopian constructions have to cope in some way with the division of labor. These regulated processes are, however, no more than the metabolism of society; they are part and parcel of the general consensus on values, and they serve to uphold the existing state of affairs. Although some of its parts are moving in predetermined, calculable ways, utopia as a whole remains a *perpetuum immobile*.

Finally, to add a more obvious observa-

tion, utopias generally seem to be curiously isolated from all other communities (if such are indeed assumed to exist at all). We have already mentioned isolation in time, but usually we also find isolation in space. Citizens of utopia are seldom allowed to travel, and, if they are, their reports will serve to magnify, rather than bridge, the differences between utopia and the rest of the world. Utopias are monolithic and homogeneous communities, suspended not only in time but also in space, shut off from the outside world, which might, after all, present a threat to the cherished immobility of the social structure.

There are other features which most utopian constructions have in common, and which it might be interesting for the sociologist to investigate. Also, the question might be asked, Just how pleasant would it be to live in even the most benevolent of utopias? Karl Popper, in his *Open Society and Its Enemies*, has explored these and other aspects of closed and utopian societies at considerable detail, and there is little to add to his incisive analyses.⁵ In any case, our concern is of a rather more specific nature than the investigation of some common structural elements of utopia. We now propose to ask the seemingly pointless, and even naïve, question whether we actually encounter all or any of these elements in *real* societies.

One of the advantages of the naïveté of this question is that it is easily answered. A society without history? There are, of course, "new societies" like the United States in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; there are "primitive societies" in a period of transition from pre-literate to literate culture. But in either case it would be not only misleading but downright false to say that there are no antecedents, no his-

³ Although many writers have been toying with the idea of immortality as conveyed by either divine grace or the progress of medical science. Why utopian writers should be concerned with this idea may be explained, in part, by the observations offered in this paper.

⁴ In fact, the subjects of sex, education, role allocation, and division of labor loom large in utopian writing from its Platonic beginnings.

⁵ Other authors could and should, of course, be mentioned who have dealt extensively with utopia and its way of life. Sociologically most relevant are L. Mumford, *The Story of Utopias* (New York: P. Smith, 1941); K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1936 [trans. by L. Wirth and E. Shils]); M. Buber, *Paths in Utopia* (New York: Macmillan, 1950 [trans. by R. F. C. Hull]).

torical roots, no developmental patterns linking these societies with the past. A society with universal consensus? One without conflict? We know that without the assistance of a secret police it has never been possible to produce such a state and that even the threat of police persecution can, at best, prevent dissensus and conflict from finding expression in open struggles for limited periods of time. A society isolated in space and devoid of processes upsetting or changing its design? Anthropologists have occasionally asserted that such societies do exist, but it has never taken very long to disprove their assertions. In fact, there is no need to discuss these questions very seriously. It is obvious that such societies do not exist—just as it is obvious that every known society changes its values and institutions continuously. Changes may be rapid or gradual, violent or regulated, comprehensive or piecemeal, but it is never entirely absent where human beings create organizations to live together.

These are commonplaces about which even sociologists will hardly disagree. In any case, utopia means Nowhere, and the very construction of a utopian society implies that it has no equivalent in reality. The writer building his world in Nowhere has the advantage of being able to ignore the commonplaces of the real world. He can populate the moon, telephone to Mars, let flowers speak and horses fly, he can even make history come to a standstill—so long as he does not confound his imagination with reality, in which case he is doomed to the fate of Plato in Syracuse, Owen in Harmony, Lenin in Russia.

Obvious as these observations may be, it is at this point that the question arises which explains our interest in the social structure of utopia and which appears to merit some more detailed examination: If the immobility of utopia, its isolation in time and space, the absence of conflict and disruptive processes, is a product of poetic imagination divorced from the commonplaces of reality—how is it that so much of recent sociological theory has been based on exactly these as-

sumptions and has, in fact, consistently operated with a utopian model of society?⁶ What are the reasons and what the consequences of the fact that every one of the elements we found characteristic of the social structure of utopia reappears in the attempt to systematize our knowledge of society and formulate sociological propositions of a generalizing nature?

It would evidently be both misleading and unfair to impute to any sociologist the explicit intention to view society as an un-moving entity of eternal stability. In fact, the commonplace that wherever there is social life there is change can be found at the outset of most sociological treatises. I contend, however, in this paper that (1) recent theoretical approaches, by analyzing social structure in terms of the elements characteristic of immobile societies, have, in fact, assumed the utopian image of society; that (2) this assumption, particularly if associated with the claim to being the most general, or even the only possible, model, has been detrimental to the advancement of sociological research; and that (3) it has to be replaced by a more useful and realistic approach to the analysis of social structure and social process.

II

Much of the theoretical discussion in contemporary sociology reminds me of a Platonic dialogue. Both share an atmosphere of unrealism, lack of controversy, and irrelevance. To be sure, I am not suggesting that there is or has been a Socrates in our profession. But, as with Plato's dialogues, somebody selects for essentially arbitrary reasons a topic or, more often, a general area of inquiry and, at the same time, states his position. Then there is some initial disagree-

⁶ In this essay I am concerned mainly with recent sociological theory. I have the impression, however, that much of the analysis offered here also applies to earlier works in social theory and that, in fact, the utopian model of society is one of two models which reappear throughout the history of Western philosophy. Expansion of the argument to a more general historical analysis of social thought might be a task both instructive and rewarding.

ment. Gradually disagreement gives way to an applauding, but disengaged and unconvincing, murmur of "Indeed," or "You don't say." Then the topic is forgotten—it has nothing to do with anything in particular anyway—and we move on to another one, starting the game all over again (or else we turn away in disgust from the enterprise of theory altogether). In this process, Plato at least managed to convey to us a moral and metaphysical view of the world; we, the scientists, have not even been able to do that.

I am reminded of Plato in yet a more specific sense. There is a curious similarity between the *Republic*—at least from the second book onward⁷—and a certain line of sociological reasoning rather prominent in these days and by no means associated with only one or two names. In the *Republic*, Socrates and his partners set out to explore the meaning of *δικαιοσύνη*, "justice." In modern sociological theory we have set out to explore the meaning of "equilibrium" or, as it is sometimes called, "homoeostasis." Socrates soon finds out that justice really means *το ἑαυτοῦ πράττειν*, that everybody does what is incumbent upon him. We have discovered that equilibrium means that everybody plays his role. To illustrate this point, Socrates and his friends go about the business of constructing a theoretical—and presumably ideal—*πόλις*. We have constructed the "social system." In the end, both Plato and we are left with a perfect society which has a structure, is functioning, is in equilibrium, and is therefore just. However, what are we going to do with it? With his blueprint in mind, Plato went to the assistance of his friend Dion in Syracuse and tried to realize it. He failed miserably.

⁷ The first book of the *Republic* has always struck me as a remarkable exception to the general pattern of Plato's Socratic dialogues. (It is, of course, well established that this book was written considerably earlier than the rest of the *Republic*.) Whereas I have little sympathy with the content of Thrasymachus' argument in defense of the "right of the strongest," I have every sympathy with his insistence, which makes this book much more controversial and interesting than any other dialogue.

Plato was wise, he admitted defeat. Without abandoning his idea of the best of all possible worlds, he decided that perhaps, so far as real human beings and real circumstances were concerned, democracy with all its shortcomings was a more effective way to proceed.⁸ We have not yet been quite as wise. Although what we still tend to call "theory" has failed as miserably in tackling real problems as Plato's blueprint, we have so far not admitted defeat.

The social system, like utopia, has not grown out of familiar reality. Instead of abstracting a limited number of variables and postulating their relevance for the explanation of a particular problem, it represents a huge and allegedly all-embracing superstructure of concepts that do not describe, propositions that do not explain, and models from which nothing follows. At least they do not describe or explain (or underlie explanations of) the real world with which we are concerned. For much of our theorizing about social systems the same objection holds that Milton Friedman raised against Lange's "Economic System":

[He] largely dispenses with the initial step of theory—a full and comprehensive set of observed and related facts to be generalized—and in the main reaches conclusions no observed facts can contradict. His emphasis is on the formal structure of the theory, the logical interrelations of the parts. He considers it largely unnecessary to test the validity of his theoretical structure except for conformity to the canons of formal logic. His categories are selected primarily to facilitate logical analysis, not empirical application or test. For the most part, the crucial question, "What observed facts would contradict the generalization suggested and what operations could be followed to observe such critical facts?" is never asked; and the theory is so set up that it could seldom be answered if it were asked. The theory pro-

⁸ I am aware that this account telescopes the known facts considerably and overstates Plato's intention to realize the Ideal State in Syracuse. The education of Dion's son was obviously a very indirect way of doing so. However, there is enough truth even in the overstatement offered here to make it a useful argument.

vides formal models of imaginary worlds, not generalizations about the real world.⁹

Consensus on values is one of the prime features of the social system. Some of its advocates make a slight concession to reality and speak of "relative consensus," thereby indicating their contempt for both the canons of scientific theory (in the models of which there is no place for "relatives" or "almosts") and the observable facts of reality (which show little evidence of any more than highly formal—and tautological—consensus). That societies are held together by some kind of value consensus seems to me either a definition of societies or a statement clearly contradicted by empirical evidence—unless one is concerned not so much with real societies and their problems as with social systems in which anything might be true, including the integration of all socially held values into a religious doctrine. I have yet to see a problem for the explanation of which the assumption of a unified value system is necessary, or a testable prediction that follows from this assumption.

It is hard to see how a social system based on ("almost") universal consensus can allow for structurally generated conflicts. Presumably, conflict always implies some kind of dissensus and disagreement about values. In Christian theology original sin was required to explain the transition from paradise to

history. Private property has been no less a *deus ex machina* in Marx's attempt to account for the transition from an early society, in which "man felt as much at home as a fish in the water," to a world of alienation and class struggles.¹⁰ Both these explanations may not be very satisfactory; they at least permit recognition of the hard and perhaps unpleasant facts of real life. Modern sociological theory of the structural-functional variety has failed to do even that (unless one wants to regard the curiously out-of-place chapter on change in Talcott Parsons' *Social System* as the original sin of this approach). By no feat of the imagination, not even by the residual category of "dysfunction," can the integrated and equilibrated social system be made to produce serious and patterned conflicts in its structure.

What the social system can produce, however, is the well-known villain of the peace of utopia, the "deviant." Even he requires some considerable argument and the introduction of a chance, or at least an undetermined variable—in this case, individual psychology. Although the system is perfect and in a state of equilibrium, individuals cannot always live up to this perfection. "Deviance is a motivated tendency for an actor to behave in contravention of one or more institutionalized normative patterns" (Parsons).¹¹ Motivated by what, though? Deviance occurs either if an individual happens to be pathological, or, if, "from whatever source [this, of course, being unspecified], a disturbance is introduced into the system."¹² In other words, it occurs for sociologically—and that means structurally—unknown and unknowable reasons. It is the bacillus that befalls the system from the dark depths of the individual psyche or the nebulous reaches of the

⁹ Milton Friedman, "Lange on Price Flexibility and Employment," in *Essays in Positive Economics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 283. The following sentences of Friedman's critique are also pertinent (pp. 283 ff.): "Lange starts with a number of abstract functions whose relevance—though not their form or content—is suggested by casual observation of the world. . . . He then largely leaves the real world and, in effect, seeks to enumerate all possible economic systems to which these functions could give rise. . . . Having completed his enumeration, or gone as far as he can or thinks desirable, Lange then seeks to relate his theoretical structure to the real world by judging to which of his alternative possibilities the real world corresponds. Is it any wonder that 'very special conditions' will have to be satisfied to explain the real world? . . . There are an infinite number of theoretical systems; there are only a few real worlds."

¹⁰ Marx tackled this problem in the Paris manuscripts of 1845 on *Economics and Philosophy*. This entire work is an outstanding illustration of the philosophical and analytical problems faced in any attempt to relate utopia and reality.

¹¹ *The Social System* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1951), p. 250.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 252; my italics.

outside world. Fortunately, the system has at its disposal certain mechanisms to deal with the deviant and to "re-equilibrate" itself, i.e., the mechanisms of social control.

The striking preoccupation of sociological theory with the related problems of reproduction, socialization, and role allocation or, on the institutional level, with (in this sequence) the family, the educational system, and the division of labor fits in well with our comparison of this type of theory and utopian societies. Plato carefully avoided Justinian's static definition of justice as *suum cuique*; in his definition the emphasis is on *πράττειν*, on the active and, to apply a much abused term, dynamic aspect. Similarly, the structural-functionalist insists on his concern not with a static but with a moving equilibrium. But what does this moving equilibrium mean? It means, in the last analysis, that the system is a structure not of the building type but of the organism type. Homeostasis is maintained by the regular occurrence of certain patterned processes which, far from disturbing the tranquillity of the village pond, in fact *are* the village pond. Heraclitus' saying, "We enter the same river, and it is not the same," does not hold here. The system is the same, however often we look at it. Children are born and socialized and allocated until they die; new children are born, and the same happens all over again. What a peaceful, what an idyllic, world the system is! Of course, it is not static in the sense of being dead; things happen all the time; but—alas!—they are under control, and they all help to maintain that precious equilibrium of the whole. Things not only happen, but they function, and so long as that is the case, all is well.

One of the more unfortunate connotations of the word "system" is its closure. Although some structural-functionalists have tried, there is no getting away from the fact that a system is essentially something that is—even if only "for purposes of analysis"—self-sufficient, internally consistent, and closed to the outside. A leg cannot be called a system; a body can. Actually, advocates

of the system have little reason to be unhappy with this term; abandoning it would rob their analyses of much of their neatness and, above all, would disable them with respect to the "whatever sources"—the villainous outsiders they can now introduce to "account" for unwanted realities. I do not want to go too far in my polemics, but I cannot help feeling that it is only a step from thinking about societies in terms of equilibrated systems to asserting that every disturber of the equilibrium, every deviant, is a "spy" or an "imperialistic agent." The system theory of society comes, by implication, dangerously close to the conspiracy-theory of history—which is not only the end of all sociology but also rather silly.¹³ There is nothing logically wrong with the term "system." It begins to give birth to all kinds of undesirable consequences only when it is applied to total societies and is made the ultimate frame of reference of analysis. It is certainly true that sociology deals with society. But it is equally true that physics deals with nature, and yet physicists would hardly see an advance in calling nature a system and trying to analyze it as such. In fact, the attempt to do so would probably—and justly—be discarded as metaphysics.

To repeat, the social system as conceived by some recent sociological theorists appears to be characterized by the same features as those contained in utopian societies. This being so, the conclusion is forced upon us that this type of theory also deals with societies from which historical change is absent and that it is, in this sense, utopian. To be sure, it is utopian not because some of the assumptions of this theory are "unrealistic"—this would be true for the assumptions of almost any scientific theory—but because it is exclusively concerned with spelling out the conditions of the func-

¹³ It could, for instance, be argued that only totalitarian states display one unified value system and that only in the case of totalitarian systems do we have to assume some outside influence ("from whatever source") to account for change—an argument that clearly reduces the extreme structural-functional position to absurdity.

tioning of a utopian social system. Structural-functional theory does not introduce unrealistic assumptions for the purpose of explaining real problems; it introduces many kinds of assumptions, concepts, and models for the sole purpose of describing a social system that has never existed and is not likely ever to come into being.

In thus comparing the social system with utopia, I feel I have done an injustice to the majority of utopian writers which needs to be corrected. With few exceptions, the purpose underlying utopian constructions has been one of criticism, even indictment, of existing societies. The story of utopias is the story of an intensely moral and polemical branch of human thinking, and, although, from a realistic and political point of view, utopian writers may have chosen doubtful means to express their values, they have certainly succeeded in conveying to their times a strong concern with the shortcomings and injustices of existing institutions and beliefs. This can hardly be said of modern sociological theory. The sense of complacency with—if not justification of—the status quo, which, by intention or default, pervades the structural-functional school of social thought is unheard of in utopian literature. Even as utopias go, the social system is rather a weak link in a tradition of penetrating and often radical criticism. I do not want to suggest that sociology should be primarily concerned with uncovering and indicting the evils of society; but I do want to assert that those sociologists who felt that they had to embark on a utopian venture were rather ill-advised in retaining the technical imperfections while at the same time abandoning the moral impulses of their numerous fore-runners.

III

It is easy to be polemical, hard to be constructive, and—at least for me—impossible to be as impressively and happily catholic as those at whom my critical comments are directed. However, I do not propose to evade the just demand to specify whose work I

mean when I refer to the utopian nature of sociological theory, to explain why I think that an approach of this kind is useless and even detrimental for our discipline, and to describe what better ways there are in my opinion to deal with our problems.

The name that comes to mind immediately when one speaks about sociological theory in these days is that of Talcott Parsons. Already, in many discussions and for many people, Parsons appears to be more of a symbol than a reality. Let me therefore state quite explicitly that my criticism applies neither to Parsons' total work nor only to his work. I am not concerned with Parsons' excellent and important philosophical analysis of *The Structure of Social Action*, nor am I concerned with his numerous perceptive contributions to the understanding of empirical phenomena. I do think, however, that much of his theoretical work in the last ten years represents an outstanding illustration of what I mean by the utopian bent in sociological theory. The double emphasis on the articulation of purely formal conceptual frameworks and on the social system as the point of departure and arrival of sociological analysis involves all the vices and, in his case, none of the virtues of a utopian approach. But, in stating this, one should not overlook that at some time or other many prominent American sociologists and some British anthropologists have engaged in the same kind of reasoning.

Two main remedies have been proposed in recent years against the malady of utopianism. In my opinion they have both been based on a wrong diagnosis—and by correcting this diagnostic error we may hope to get to the root of the trouble and at the same time to a path that promises to lead us out of utopia.

For some time now it has been quite popular in our profession to support T. H. Marshall's demand for "sociological stepping stones in the middle distance" or Robert K. Merton's plea for "theories of the middle range." I cannot say that I am very happy with these formulations. True,

both Marshall and Merton explain at some length what they mean by their formulas. In particular, they advocate something they call a "convergence" of theory and research. But "convergence" is a very mechanical notion of a process that defies the laws of mechanics. Above all, this conception implies that sociological theory and sociological research are two separate activities which it is possible to divide and to join. I do not believe that this is so. In fact, I think that, so long as we hold this belief, our theory will be logical and philosophical, and our research will at best be sociographic, with sociology disappearing in the gorge between these two. The admonitions of Marshall and Merton may actually have led to a commendable rediscovery of empirical problems of investigation, but I venture to assert that, looking purely at their formulations, this has been an unintended consequence, a by-product rather than the content of their statements.¹⁴

There is no theory that can be divorced from empirical research; but, of course, the reverse is equally true. I have no sympathy with the confusion of the just demand that sociological analysis should be inspired by empirical problems and the unjust demand that it should be based on, or even exclusively concerned with, something called "empirical research." As a matter of fact, the advocates of "empirical research" and the defenders of abstract theory have been strikingly similar in one, to my mind crucial, respect (which explains, by the way, why they have been able to coexist with comparatively little friction and controversy): they have both largely dispensed with that prime impulse of all science and scholarship, with the puzzlement over specific, concrete, and—if this word must be used—empirical problems. Many sociolo-

¹⁴ Most of the works of Marshall and Merton do display the kind of concern with problems which I am here advocating. My objection to their formulations is therefore not directed against these works but against their explicit assumption that all that is wrong with recent theory is its generality and that by simply reducing the level of generality we can solve all problems.

gists have lost the simple impulse of curiosity, the desire to solve riddles of experience, the concern with problems. This, rather than anything else, explains both the success and the danger of the utopian fallacy in sociological thinking and of its smaller brother, the fallacy of empirical research.

It is perhaps fairly obvious that a book like *The Social System* displays but a minimal concern with riddles of experience. But I do not want to be misunderstood. My plea for a reinstatement of empirical problems in the central place that is due to them is by no means merely a plea for greater recognition of "facts," "data," or "empirical evidence." I think that, from the point of view of concern with problems, there is very little to choose between *The Social System* and the ever increasing number of undoubtedly well-documented Ph.D. theses on such subjects as "The Social Structure of a Hospital," "The Role of the Professional Football Player," and "Family Relations in a New York Suburb." "Areas of Investigation," "Fields of Inquiry," "Subjects," and "Topics," chosen because nobody has studied them before or for some other random reason, are not problems. What I mean is that at the outset of every scientific investigation there has to be a fact or set of facts that is puzzling the investigator: children of businessmen prefer professional to business occupations; workers in the automobile industry of Detroit go on strike; there is a higher incidence of suicides among upwardly mobile persons than among others; Socialist parties in predominantly Catholic countries of Europe seem unable to get more than 30 per cent of the popular vote; Hungarian people revolt against the Communist regime. There is no need to enumerate more of such facts; what matters is that every one of them invites the question "Why?" and it is this question, after all, which has always inspired that noble human activity in which we are engaged—science.

There is little point in restating methodological platitudes. Let me confine my-

self, therefore, to saying that a scientific discipline that is problem-conscious at every stage of its development is very unlikely ever to find itself in the prison of utopian thought or to separate theory and research. Problems require explanation; explanations require assumptions or models and hypotheses derived from such models; hypotheses, which are always, by implication, predictions as well as explanatory propositions, require testing by further facts; testing often generates new problems.¹⁵ If anybody wants to distinguish theory and research in this process, he is welcome to do so; my own feeling is that this distinction confuses, rather than clarifies, our thinking.

The loss of problem-consciousness in modern sociology explains many of the drawbacks of the present state of our discipline and, in particular, the utopian character of sociological theory; moreover, it is in itself a problem worthy of investigation. How was it that sociologists, of all people, could lose touch with the riddles of experience, of which there are so many in the social world? At this point, I think, the ideological interpretation of sociological development which has recently been advanced by a number of authors is pertinent.¹⁶ By turning away from the critical facts of experience, sociologists have both followed and strengthened the trend toward conservatism that is so powerful in the intellectual world today. What is more, their conservatism is

¹⁵ It is, however, essential to this approach—to add one not so trivial methodological point—that we realize the proper function of empirical testing. As Popper has demonstrated in many of his works since 1935 (the year of publication of *Logik der Forschung*), there can be no verification in science; empirical tests serve to falsify accepted theories, and every refutation of a theory is a triumph of scientific research. Testing that is designed to confirm hypotheses neither advances our knowledge nor generates new problems.

¹⁶ I am thinking in particular of the still outstanding articles by S. M. Lipset and R. Bendix on "Social Status and Social Structure," *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. II (1951), and of the early parts of L. Coser's work, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1956).

not of the militant kind found in the so-called Left Wing of conservative parties in England, France, Germany, and the United States; it is, rather, a conservatism by implication, the conservatism of complacency. I am sure that Parsons and many of those who have joined him in utopia would disclaim being conservatives, and, so far as their explicit political convictions go, there is no reason to doubt their sincerity. At the same time, their way of looking at society or, rather, of not looking at society when they should have promoted a sense of disengagement, of not wanting to worry about things, and has, in fact, elevated this attitude of abstinence to a "scientific theory" according to which there is no need to worry. By thus leaving the job of worrying to the powers that be, sociologists have implicitly recognized the legitimacy of these powers; their disengagement has turned out to be a—however involuntary—engagement on the side of the status quo. What a dramatic misunderstanding of Max Weber's attempt to separate the vocation of politics from that of science!

Let me repeat that I am not advocating a sociological science that is politically radical in the content of its theories. In any case, there would be little sense in trying to do this, since, logically speaking, there can be no such science. I am advocating, however, a sociological science that is inspired by the moral fiber of its forefathers; and I am convinced that if we regain the problem-consciousness which has been lost in the last decades, we cannot fail to recover the critical engagement in the realities of our social world which we need to do our job well. For I hope I have made it quite clear that problem-consciousness is not merely a means of avoiding ideological biases but is, above all, an indispensable condition of progress in any discipline of human inquiry. The path out of utopia begins with the recognition of puzzling facts of experience and the tackling of problems posed by such facts.

There is yet another reason why I think that the utopian character of recent socio-

logical theory has been detrimental to the advancement of our discipline. It is quite conceivable that in the explanation of specific problems we shall at some stage want to employ models of a highly general kind or even formulate general laws. Stripped of its more formal and decorative elements, the social system could be, and sometimes has been, regarded as such a model. For instance, we may want to investigate the problem of why achievement in the educational system ranks so high among people's concerns in our society. The social system can be thought of as suggesting that in advanced industrial societies the educational system is the main, and tends to be the only, mechanism of role allocation. In this case, the social system proves to be a useful model. It seems to me, however, that even in this limited sense the social system is a highly problematic, or at least a very one-sided, model and that here, too, a new departure is needed.

It is perhaps inevitable that the models underlying scientific explanations acquire a life of their own, divorced from the specific purpose for which they have originally been constructed. The *Homo oeconomicus* of modern economics, invented in the first place as a useful, even if clearly unrealistic, assumption from which testable hypotheses could be derived, has today become the cardinal figure in a much discussed philosophy of human nature far beyond the aspirations of most economists. The indeterminacy principle in modern physics, which again is nothing but a useful assumption without claim to any reality other than operational, has been taken as a final refutation of all determinist philosophies of nature. Analogous statements could be made about the equilibrium model of society—although, as I have tried to show, it would unfortunately be wrong to say that the original purpose of this model was to explain specific empirical problems. We face the double task of having to specify the conditions under which this model proves analytically useful and of having to cope with the philosophical

implications of the model itself.¹⁷ It may seem a digression for a sociologist to occupy himself with the latter problem; however, in my opinion it is both dangerous and irresponsible to ignore the implications of one's assumptions, even if these are philosophical rather than scientific in a technical sense. The models with which we work, apart from being useful tools, determine to no small extent our general perspectives, our selection of problems, and the emphasis in our explanations, and I believe that in this respect, too, the utopian social system has played an unfortunate role in our discipline.

There may be some problems for the explanation of which it is important to assume an equilibrated, functioning social system based on consensus, absence of conflict, and isolation in time and space. I think there are such problems, although their number is probably much smaller than many contemporary sociologists wish us to believe. The equilibrium model of society also has a long tradition in social thinking, including, of course, all utopian thinking but also such works as Rousseau's *Contrat social* and Hegel's *Philosophy of Law*. But neither in relation to the explanation of sociological problems nor in the history of social philosophy is it the only model, and I would strongly protest any implicit or explicit claim that it can be so regarded. Parsons' statement in *The Social System* that this "work constitutes a step toward the development of a generalized theoretical sys-

¹⁷ The approach here characterized by the catchword "social system" has two aspects which are not necessarily related and which I am here treating separately. One is its concentration on formal "conceptual frameworks" of no relevance to particular empirical problems, as discussed in the previous section. The other aspect lies in the application of an equilibrium model of society to the analysis of real societies and is dealt with in the present section. The emphasis of advocates of the social system on one or the other of these aspects has been shifting, and to an extent it is possible to accept the one without the other. Both aspects, however, betray the traces of utopianism, and it is therefore indicated to deal with both of them in an essay that promises to show a path out of utopia.

tem"¹⁸ is erroneous in every respect I can think of and, in particular, insofar as it implies that all sociological problems can be approached with the equilibrium model of society.

It may be my personal bias that I can think of many more problems to which the social system does not apply than those to which it does, but I would certainly insist that, even on the highly abstract and largely philosophical level on which Parsons moves, at least one other model of society is required. It has an equally long and, I think, a better tradition than the equilibrium model. In spite of this fact, no modern sociologist has as yet formulated its basic tenets in such a way as to render it useful for the explanation of critical social facts. Only in the last year or two has there been some indication that this alternative model, which I shall call the "conflict model of society," is gaining ground in sociological analysis.

The extent to which the social system model has influenced even our thinking about social change and has marred our vision in this important area of problems is truly remarkable. Two facts in particular illustrate this influence. In talking about change, most sociologists today accept the entirely spurious distinction between "change within" and "change of societies," which makes sense only if we recognize the system as our ultimate and only reference point. At the same time, many sociologists seem convinced that, in order to explain processes of change, they have to discover certain special circumstances which set these processes in motion, implying that, in society, change is an abnormal, or at least an unusual, state that has to be accounted for

in terms of deviations from a "normal," equilibrated system. I think that in both these respects we shall have to revise our assumptions radically. A Galilean turn of thought is required which makes us realize that all units of social organization are continuously changing, unless some force intervenes to arrest this change. It is our task to identify the factors interfering with the normal process of change rather than to look for variables involved in bringing about change. Moreover, change is ubiquitous not only in time but also in space, that is to say, every part of societies is constantly changing, and it is impossible to distinguish between "change within" and "change of," "microscopic" and "macroscopic" change. Historians discovered a long time ago that in describing the historical process it is insufficient to confine one's attention to the affairs of state, to wars, revolutions, and government action. From them we could learn that what happens in Mrs. Smith's house, in a trade union local, or in the parish of a church is just as significant for the social process of history and, in fact, *is* just as much the social process of history as what happens in the White House or the Kremlin.

The great creative force that carries along change in the model I am trying to describe and that is equally ubiquitous is social conflict. The notion that wherever there is social life there is conflict may be unpleasant and disturbing. Nevertheless, it is indispensable to our understanding of social problems. As with change, we have grown accustomed to look for special causes or circumstances whenever we encounter conflict; but, again, a complete turn is necessary in our thinking. Not the presence but the absence of conflict is surprising and abnormal, and we have good reason to be suspicious if we find a society or social organization that displays no evidence of conflict. To be sure, we do not have to assume that conflict is always violent and uncontrolled. There is probably a continuum from civil war to parliamentary debate, from strikes and lockouts to joint consultation. Our problems and their explanations will undoubtedly teach us a great deal about the range of variation in forms of

¹⁸ Characteristically, this statement is made in the chapter "The Processes of Change of Social System" (p. 486). In many ways I have here taken this chapter of *The Social System* as a clue to problems of structural-functionalism—an approach which a page-by-page interpretation of the amazingly weak argument offered by Parsons in support of his double claim that (a) the stabilized system is the central point of reference of sociological analysis and (b) any theory of change is impossible as the present state of our knowledge could easily justify.

conflict. In formulating such explanations, however, we must never lose sight of the underlying assumption that conflict can be temporarily suppressed, regulated, channeled, and controlled but that neither a philosopher-king nor a modern dictator can abolish it once and for all.

There is a third notion which, together with change and conflict, constitutes the instrumentarium of the conflict model of society: the notion of constraint. From the point of view of this model, societies and social organizations are held together not by consensus but by constraint, not by universal agreement but by the coercion of some by others. It may be useful for some purposes to speak of the "value system" of a society, but in the conflict model such characteristic values are ruling rather than common, enforced rather than accepted, at any given point of time. And as conflict generates change, so constraint may be thought of as generating conflict. We assume that conflict is ubiquitous, since constraint is ubiquitous wherever human beings set up social organizations. In a highly formal sense, it is always the basis of constraint that is at issue in social conflict.

I have sketched the conflict model of society—as I see it—only very briefly. But except in a philosophical context there is no need to elaborate on it, unless, of course, such elaboration is required for the explanation of specific problems. However, my point here is a different one. I hope it is evident that there is a fundamental difference between the equilibrium and the conflict models of society. Utopia is—to use the language of the economist—a world of certainty. It is paradise found; utopians know all the answers. But we live in a world of uncertainty. We do not know what an ideal society looks like—and if we think we do, we are fortunately unable to realize our conception. Because there is no certainty (which, by definition, is shared by everybody in that condition), there has to be constraint to assure some livable minimum of coherence. Because we do not know all the answers, there has to be continuous conflict over values and policies. Because of uncer-

tainty, there is always change and development. Quite apart from its merits as a tool of scientific analysis, the conflict model is essentially non-utopian; it is the model of an open society.

I do not intend to fall victim to the mistake of many structural-functional theorists and advance for the conflict model a claim to comprehensive and exclusive applicability. As far as I can see, we need for the explanation of sociological problems both the equilibrium and the conflict models of society; and it may well be that, in a philosophical sense, society has two faces of equal reality: one of stability, harmony, and consensus and one of change, conflict, and constraint.¹⁹ Strictly speaking, it does not matter whether we select for investigation problems that can be understood only in terms of the equilibrium model or problems for the explanation of which the conflict model is required. There is no intrinsic criterion for preferring one to the other. My own feeling is, however, that, in the face of recent developments in our discipline and the critical considerations offered earlier in this paper, we may be well advised to concentrate in the future not only on concrete problems but on such problems as involve explanations in terms of constraint, conflict, and change. This second face of society may aesthetically be rather less pleasing than the social system—but, if all that sociology had to offer were an easy escape to utopian tranquillity, it would hardly be worth our efforts.

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¹⁹ I should not be prepared to claim that these two are the only possible models of sociological analysis. Without any doubt, we need a considerable number of models on many levels for the explanation of specific problems, and, more often than not, the two models outlined here are too general to be of immediate relevance. In philosophical terms, however, it is hard to see what other models of society there could be which are not of either the equilibrium or the conflict type.