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## THE NORM OF RECIPROCITY: A PRELIMINARY STATEMENT\*

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*The manner in which the concept of reciprocity is implicated in functional theory is explored, enabling a reanalysis of the concepts of "survival" and "exploitation." The need to distinguish between the concepts of complementarity and reciprocity is stressed. Distinctions are also drawn between (1) reciprocity as a pattern of mutually contingent exchange of gratifications, (2) the existential or folk belief in reciprocity, and (3) the generalized moral norm of reciprocity. Reciprocity as a moral norm is analyzed; it is hypothesized that it is one of the universal "principal components" of moral codes. As Westermarck states, "To requite a benefit, or to be grateful to him who bestows it, is probably everywhere, at least under certain circumstances, regarded as a duty. This is a subject which in the present connection calls for special consideration." Ways in which the norm of reciprocity is implicated in the maintenance of stable social systems are examined.*

THERE is no duty more indispensable than that of returning a kindness," says Cicero, adding that "all men distrust one forgetful of a benefit."—Men have been insisting on the importance of reciprocity for a long time. While many sociologists concur in this judgment, there are nonetheless a few concepts in sociology which remain more obscure and ambiguous. Howard Becker, for example, has found this concept so important that he has titled one of his books *Man in Reciprocity* and has even spoken of man as *Homo reciprocus*, all without venturing to present a straightforward definition of reciprocity. Instead Becker states, "I don't propose to furnish any definition of reciprocity; if you produce some, they will be your own achievements."<sup>1</sup>

\* Sections of this paper were read at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, September, 1959. The author is indebted to Robert K. Merton, Howard S. Becker, John W. Bennett, Louis Schneider, and Gregory Stone for reading an earlier draft but knows of no adequate "reciprocity" for their many valuable suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> Howard Becker, *Man in Reciprocity*, New York: Prager, 1956, p. 1.

Becker is not alone in failing to stipulate formally the meaning of reciprocity, while at the same time affirming its prime importance. Indeed, he is in very good company, agreeing with L. T. Hobhouse, who held that "reciprocity . . . is the vital principle of society,"<sup>2</sup> and is a key intervening variable through which shared social rules are enabled to yield social stability. Yet Hobhouse presents no systematic definition of reciprocity. While hardly any clearer than Hobhouse, Richard Thurnwald is equally certain of the central importance of the "principle of reciprocity": this principle is almost a primordial imperative which "pervades every relation of primitive life"<sup>3</sup> and is the basis on which the entire social and ethical life of primitive civilizations presumably rests.<sup>4</sup> Georg Sim-

<sup>2</sup> L. T. Hobhouse, *Morals in Evolution: A Study in Comparative Ethics*, London: Chapman & Hall, 1951, First edition, 1906, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Thurnwald, *Economics in Primitive Communities*, London: Oxford University Press, 1932, p. 106.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137. See also, Richard Thurnwald, "Banaro Society: Social Organization and Kinship System of a Tribe in the Interior of New Guinea,"



mel's comments go a step further, emphasizing the importance of reciprocity not only for primitive but for all societies. Simmel remarks that social equilibrium and cohesion could not exist without "the reciprocity of service and return service," and that "all contacts among men rest on the schema of giving and returning the equivalence."<sup>6</sup>

Were we confronted with only an obscure concept, which we had no reason to assume to be important, we might justifiably consign it to the Valhalla of intellectual history, there to consort eternally with the countless incunabula of sociological ingenuity. However convenient, such a disposition would be rash, for we can readily note the importance attributed to the concept of reciprocity by such scholars as George Homans, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Raymond Firth,<sup>9</sup> as well as by such earlier writers as Durkheim, Marx, Mauss, Malinowski, and von Wiese, to name only a few masters.

Accordingly, the aims of this paper are: (1) to indicate the manner in which the concept of reciprocity is tacitly involved in but formally neglected by modern functional theory; (2) to clarify the concept and display some of its diverse intellectual contents, thus facilitating its theoretical employment and research utility; and (3) to suggest concretely ways in which the clarified concept provides new leverage for analysis of the central problems of sociological theory, namely, accounting for stability and instability in social systems.

#### RECIPROCITY AND FUNCTIONAL THEORY

My concern with reciprocity developed initially from a critical reexamination of current functional theory, especially the work of

*Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association*, 8, 1916; among other matters of relevance to the analysis of reciprocity, Thurnwald's discussion here (p. 275) opens the issue of the "exchange of women," which Lévi-Strauss later developed.

<sup>6</sup> Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, translated and edited by Kurt H. Wolff, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950, p. 387.

<sup>9</sup> See, respectively, George Homans, "Social Behavior as Exchange," *American Journal of Sociology*, 63 (May, 1958), pp. 597-606; C. Lévi-Strauss, *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*, Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1949; and Raymond Firth, *Primitive Polynesian Economy*, New York: Humanities Press, 1950.

Robert Merton and Talcott Parsons. The fullest ramifications of what follows can best be seen in this theoretical context. Merton's familiar paradigm of functionalism stresses that analysis must begin with the identification of some problematic pattern of human behavior, some institution, role, or shared pattern of belief. Merton stipulates clearly the basic functionalist assumption, the way in which the problematic pattern is to be understood: he holds that the "central orientation of functionalism" is "expressed in the practice of interpreting data by establishing their consequences for larger structures in which they are implicated."<sup>7</sup> The functionalist's emphasis upon studying the *existent* consequences, the ongoing functions or dysfunctions, of a social pattern may be better appreciated if it is remembered that this concern developed in a polemic against the earlier anthropological notion of a "survival." The survival, of course, was regarded as a custom held to be unexplainable in terms of its existent consequences or utility, and which, therefore, had to be understood with reference to its consequences for social arrangements no longer present.

Merton's posture toward the notion of a social survival is both pragmatic and sceptical. He asserts that the question of survivals is largely an empirical one; if the evidence demonstrates that a given social pattern is presently functionless then it simply has to be admitted provisionally to be a survival. Contrariwise, if no such evidence can be adduced "then the quarrel dwindles of its own accord."<sup>8</sup> It is in this sense that his position is pragmatic. It is also a sceptical position in that he holds that "even when such survivals are identified in contemporary literate societies, they seem to add little to our understanding of human behavior or the dynamics of social change. . . ." We are told, finally, that "the sociologist of literate societies may neglect survivals with no apparent loss."<sup>10</sup>

This resolution of the problem of survivals does not seem entirely satisfactory, for although vital empirical issues are involved there are also important questions that can

<sup>7</sup> R. K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957, pp. 46-47.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*



only be clarified theoretically. Merton's discussion implies that certain patterns of human behavior are already known to be, or may in the future be shown to be, social survivals. How, then, can *these* be explained in terms of functional theory? Can functional theory ignore them on the grounds that they are not socially consequential? Consequential or not, such social survivals would in themselves entail patterns of behavior or belief which are no less in need of explanation than any other. More than that, their very existence, which Merton conceives possible, would seem to contradict the "central orientation" of functional theory.

Functionalism, to repeat, explains the persistence of social patterns in terms of their ongoing consequences for existent social systems. If social survivals, which by definition have no such consequences, are conceded to exist or to be possible, then it would seem that functionalism is by its own admission incapable of explaining them. To suggest that survivals do not help us to understand other patterns of social behavior is beside the mark. The decisive issue is whether existent versions of functional theory can explain social survivals, not whether specific social survivals can explain other social patterns.

It would seem that functionalists have but one of two choices: either they must dogmatically deny the existence or possibility of functionless patterns (survivals), and assert that all social behavior is explainable parsimoniously on the basis of the same fundamental functionalist assumption, that is, in terms of its consequences for surrounding social structures; or, more reasonably, they must concede that some social patterns are or may be survivals, admitting that existent functional theory fails to account for such instances. In the latter case, functionalists must develop further their basic assumptions on the generalized level required. I believe that one of the strategic ways in which such basic assumptions can be developed is by recognizing the manner in which the concept of *reciprocity* is tacitly involved in them, and by explicating the concept's implications for functional theory.

The tacit implication of the concept of reciprocity in functional theory can be illustrated in Merton's analysis of the latent functions of the political machine in the

United States. Merton inquires how political machines continue to operate, despite the fact that they frequently run counter to both the mores and the law. The *general* form of his explanation is to identify the consequences of the machine for surrounding structures and to demonstrate that the machine performs "positive functions which are at the same time not adequately fulfilled by other existing patterns and structures."<sup>11</sup> It seems evident, however, that simply to establish its consequences for other social structures provides no answer to the question of the persistence of the political machine.<sup>12</sup> The explanation miscarries because no explicit analysis is made of the feedback through which the social structures or groups, whose needs are satisfied by the political machine, in turn "reciprocate" and repay the machine for the services received from it. In this case, the patterns of reciprocity, implied in the notion of the "corruption" of the machine, are well known and fully documented.

To state the issue generally: the demonstration that A is functional for B can help to account for A's persistence only if the functional theorist tacitly assumes some principle of reciprocity. It is in this sense that some concept of reciprocity apparently has been smuggled into the basic but unstated postulates of functional analysis. The demonstration that A is functional for B helps to account for A's own persistence and stability only on two related assumptions: (1) that B *reciprocates* A's services, and (2) that B's service to A is *contingent* upon A's performance of positive functions for B. The second assumption, indeed, is one implication of the definition of reciprocity as a transaction. Unless B's services to A are contingent upon the services provided by A, it is pointless to examine the latter if one wishes to account for the persistence of A.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73. Among the functions of the political machine to which Merton refers are: the organization and centralization of power so that it can be mobilized to satisfy the needs of different groups, provision of personalized forms of assistance for lower-class groups, giving political privileges and aid to business groups, and granting protection for illicit rackets.

<sup>12</sup> An initial statement of this point is to be found in A. W. Gouldner, "Reciprocity and Autonomy in Functional Theory," in L. Gross, editor, *Symposium on Sociological Theory*, Evanston, Ill.: Row, Peterson, 1959, pp. 241-270.



It may be assumed, as a first approximation, that a social unit or group is more likely to contribute to another which provides it with benefits than to one which does not; nonetheless, there are certain general conditions under which one pattern may provide benefits for the other despite a *lack* of reciprocity. An important case of this situation is where power arrangements constrain the continuance of services. If B is considerably more powerful than A, B may force A to benefit it with little or no reciprocity. This social arrangement, to be sure, is less stable than one in which B's reciprocity *motivates* A to continue performing services for B, but it is hardly for this reason sociologically unimportant.

The problem can also be approached in terms of the functional autonomy<sup>13</sup> of two units relative to each other. For example, B may have many alternative sources for supplying the services that it normally receives from A. A, however, may be dependent upon B's services and have no, or comparatively few, alternatives. Consequently, the continued provision of benefits by one pattern,<sup>14</sup> A, for another, B, depends not only upon (1) the benefits which A in turn receives from B, but also on (2) the power which B possesses relative to A, and (3) the alternative sources of services accessible to each, beyond those provided by the other. In short, an explanation of the stability of a pattern, or of the relationship between A and B, requires investigation of mutually contingent benefits rendered and of the manner in which this mutual contingency is sustained. The latter, in turn, requires utilization of two different theoretical traditions and general orientations, one stressing the significance of power differences and the other emphasizing the degree of mutual dependence of the patterns or parties involved.

Functional theory, then, requires some assumption concerning reciprocity. It must, however, avoid the "Pollyanna Fallacy" which optimistically assumes that structures

<sup>13</sup> For fuller discussion of this concept, see Gouldner, *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Use of terms such as "pattern" or "unit" is intended to indicate that the present discussion deliberately collapses distinctions between institutional, interpersonal, group, or role reciprocities, treating them here under a single rubric for reasons of space.

securing "satisfactions" from others will invariably be "grateful" and will always reciprocate. Therefore it cannot be merely hypothesized that reciprocity will operate in every case; its occurrence must, instead, be documented empirically. Although reciprocal relations stabilize patterns, it need not follow that a lack of reciprocity is socially impossible or invariably disruptive of the patterns involved. Relations with little or no reciprocity may, for example, occur when power disparities allow one party to coerce the other. There may also be special mechanisms which compensate for or control the tensions which arise in the event of a breakdown in reciprocity. Among such compensatory mechanisms there may be culturally shared prescriptions of one-sided or unconditional generosity, such as the Christian notion of "turning the other cheek" or "walking the second mile," the feudal notion of "*noblesse oblige*," or the Roman notion of "clemency." There may also be cultural prohibitions banning the examination of certain interchanges from the standpoint of their concrete reciprocity, as expressed by the cliché, "It's not the gift but the sentiment that counts." The major point here is that if empirical analysis fails to detect the existence of functional reciprocity, or finds that it has been disrupted, it becomes necessary to search out and analyze the compensatory arrangements that may provide means of controlling the resultant tensions, thereby enabling the problematic pattern to remain stable.

#### A RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF "SURVIVALS"

Thus far reciprocity has been discussed as a mutually contingent exchange of benefits between two or more units, as if it were an "all or none" matter. Once the problem is posed in this way, however, it is apparent that reciprocity is not merely present or absent but is, instead, quantitatively variable—or may be treated as such. The benefits exchanged, at one extreme, may be identical or equal. At the other logical extreme, one party may give nothing in return for the benefits it has received. Both of these extremes are probably rare in social relations and the intermediary case, in which one party gives something more or less than that received, is probably more common than either of the limiting cases.



Having cast the problem of reciprocity in these quantitative terms, there emerges an important implication for the question of social survivals. The quantitative view of reciprocity. These functionalists made the cogent of the *earlier* notion of a survival. It may now be seen that there a survival was tacitly treated as one of the limiting cases of reciprocity, that is, one in which a pattern provides *nothing* in exchange for the benefits given it.

The polemical opposition of the earlier functionalists to this view of a survival rests implicitly on an unqualified principle of reciprocity. These functionalists made the cogent assumption that a social pattern which persists must be securing satisfaction of its own needs from certain other patterns. What was further and more dubiously assumed, however, was that if this pattern continues to be "served" this could only be because it reciprocally provided *some* gratifications to its benefactors. In the course of the polemic, the question of the degree of such gratification—the relation between its output and input—became obscured. To the early functionalists, the empirical problem became one of unearthing the hidden contributions made by a seeming survival and, thereby, showing that it is not in fact functionless. In effect, this enjoined the functionalist to exert his ingenuity to search out the hidden reciprocities for it was assumed that there must be some reciprocities somewhere. This led, in certain cases, as Audrey Richards states, to "some far-fetched explanations. . . ." <sup>15</sup>

If, however, it had been better understood that compensatory mechanisms might have been substituted for reciprocity, or that power disparities might have maintained the "survival" despite its lack of reciprocity, then many fruitful problems may well have emerged. Above all, the early functionalists neglected the fact that a survival is only the limiting case of a larger class of social phenomena, namely, relations between parties or patterns in which functional reciprocity is *not equal*. While the survival, defined as the extreme case of a *complete lack* of reciprocity, may be rare, the larger class of *unequal exchanges*, of which survivals are a part, is

<sup>15</sup> Raymond Firth, editor, *Man and Culture: An Evaluation of the Work of Bronislaw Malinowski*, New York: The Humanities Press, 1957, p. 19.

frequent. The tacit conception of survivals as entailing no reciprocity led the early functionalists to neglect the *larger class of unequal exchanges*. It is this problem which the functionalist polemic against survivals has obscured to the present day.

#### THE "EXPLOITATION" PROBLEM

It was, however, not only the functionalist polemic against the concept of survivals that obscured the significance and inhibited the study of unequal exchanges. A similar result is also produced by the suspicion with which many modern sociologists understandably regard the concept of "exploitation." This concept of course is central to the traditional socialist critique of modern capitalism. In the now nearly-forgotten language of political economy, "exploitation" refers to a relationship in which unearned income results from certain kinds of unequal exchange.

Starting perhaps with Sismondi's notion of "spoliation," and possibly even earlier with the physiocrat's critique of exchange as intrinsically unproductive, the concept of exploitation can be traced from the work of the Saint-Simonians to that of Marx and Proudhon.<sup>16</sup> It is also present in Veblen's notion of the Vested Interest which he characterizes as "the right to something for nothing" or, in other words, as *institutionalized* exploitation. Even after the emergence of sociology as a separate discipline the concept of exploitation appears in the works of E. A. Ross,<sup>17</sup> von Wiese, and Howard Becker.<sup>18</sup> As it passed into sociology, how-

<sup>16</sup> The views of these and other analysts of exploitation are ably summarized in C. Gide and C. Rist, *A History of Economic Doctrines*, translated by R. Richards, Boston: Heath, revised edition, 1918.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., E. A. Ross, *New-Age Sociology*, New York: Appleton-Century, 1940, esp. Chapter 9.

<sup>18</sup> Note von Wiese and Becker's comment: "The Marxians trace the social process of exploitation to the 'capitalistic' economic order; their thesis is that capitalism creates exploitation. We, on the other hand, do not deny the existence of capitalistic exploitation, but it is for us only one of the forms which are found among the phenomena of exploitation. The destruction of capitalism will not signalize the end of exploitation, but will merely prevent the appearance of some of its forms and will open up new opportunities for others." L. von Wiese and Howard Becker, *Systematic Sociology*, New York: Wiley, 1932, p. 700. It would seem that 20th century history amply confirms this view.



ever, the concept was generalized beyond its original economic application. Ross and Becker-von Wiese, for example, speak of various types of exploitation: economic, to be sure, but also religious, "egotic," and sexual. However, just as the concept of exploitation was being generalized and made available for social analysis, it almost disappeared from sociological usage.

"Almost disappeared" because there remains one area in which unabashed, full-scale use of the concept is made by sociologists. This is in the study of sexual relations. As Kanin and Howard remark, "It has been the *practice* to speak of exploitation when males were found to have entered sexual liaisons with women of comparative lower status."<sup>19</sup> Kingsley Davis also uses the notion of exploitation implicitly in his discussion of the incest taboo, remarking that ". . . father-daughter incest would put the daughter in a position of subordination. While she was still immature the father could use his power to take advantage of her."<sup>20</sup> What Davis is saying is that one function of the incest taboo is to prevent sexual exploitation. He goes on to add that "legitimate sexual relations ordinarily involve a certain amount of reciprocity. Sex is exchanged for something equally valuable."<sup>21</sup> This is an interesting commentary, first, because Davis is quite clear about treating exploitation in the context of a discussion of reciprocity; and second, because he explicitly uses a notion of reciprocity in a strategic way even though it is not systematically explored elsewhere in his volume, once again illustrating the tendency to use the concept and to assume its analytic importance without giving it careful conceptualization.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> E. Kanin and D. H. Howard, "Postmarital Consequences of Premarital Sex Adjustments," *American Sociological Review*, 23 (October, 1958), p. 558. (My italics.)

<sup>20</sup> Kingsley Davis, *Human Society*, New York: Macmillan, 1949, p. 403.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 404.

<sup>22</sup> Note Davis's tendency to assume that legitimate sexual relations entail an exchange of *equal* values even though his previous sentence indicates that there may be no more than "a *certain amount* of reciprocity" involved. The latter is a way of talking about *unequal* exchanges and thus implies that these occur in institutionalized and not only in illicit relations. This is an important problem that cannot be developed here.

The continued use of the concept of exploitation in sociological analyses of sexual relations stems largely from the brilliant work of Willard Waller on the dynamics of courtship. Waller's ambivalent comments about the concept suggest why it has fallen into sociological disrepute. "The word *exploitation* is by no means a desirable one," explains Waller, "but we have not been able to find another which will do as well. The dictionary definition of exploitation as an 'unfair or unjust utilization of another' contains a value judgment, and this value judgment is really a part of the ordinary sociological meaning of the term."<sup>23</sup> In short, the concept of exploitation may have become disreputable because its value implications conflict with modern sociology's effort to place itself on a value-free basis, as well as because it is a concept commonly and correctly associated with the critique of modern society emphasized by the political left. But the concept *need* not be used in such an ideological manner; it can be employed simply to refer to certain transactions involving an *exchange of things of unequal value*. It is important to guarantee that the ordinary value implications of a term do not intrude upon its scientific use. It is also important, however, to prevent our distaste for the ideological implications of exploitation from inducing a compulsive and equally ideological neglect of its cognitive substance.

The unsavory implications of the concept of exploitation have *not* excluded it from studies of sexual relations, although almost all other specializations in sociology eschew it. Why this is so remains a tempting problem for the sociology of knowledge, but cannot be explored here. In the present context, the important implications are the following: If the possible sexual exploitation of daughters by fathers gives rise, as Davis suggests, to mechanisms that serve to prevent this, then it would seem that *other* types of exploitation may also be controlled by *other* kinds of mechanisms. These may be no less important and universal than the incest taboo. If the exploitation of women by men (or men by women) is worthy of sociological attention, then also worth studying is the

<sup>23</sup> Willard Waller, *The Family: A Dynamic Interpretation*, revised by Reuben Hill, New York: Dryden, 1951, p. 163.



exploitation of students by teachers, of workers by management or union leaders, of patients by doctors,<sup>24</sup> and so on. If the notion of exploitation, in a value-free sense, is useful for the analysis of sexual relations then it can be of similar aid in analyzing many other kinds of social relations.

Doubtless "exploitation" is by now so heavily charged with misleading ideological resonance that the term itself can scarcely be salvaged for purely scientific purposes and will, quite properly, be resisted by most American sociologists. This is unimportant. Perhaps a less emotionally freighted—if infelicitous—term such as "reciprocity imbalance" will suffice to direct attention once again to the crucial question of unequal exchanges.

In any event, the present analysis of reciprocity opens up long-neglected questions, yielding a new perspective on the relation between functional theory and the concepts of "survival" and "exploitation." In the latter case, moreover, intimations emerge of some of the ways in which two diverse theoretical traditions contain surprising convergences.

These two traditions are, first, that which is commonly if questionably<sup>25</sup> held to begin with Comte, was developed by Durkheim, and reaches its fullest current expression in the work of Parsons. The second tradition, while often ideologically distorted nevertheless retains significant sociological substance, derives from Marx and Engels, was developed by Kautsky, and ended in Bukharin. The latent convergence between these two schools involves the implicit stress that each gives to reciprocity, albeit to polar ends of its continuum.

The "Comteian" tradition, of course, approached reciprocity through its emphasis on the division of labor, viewed as a major

<sup>24</sup> The point is not to stress, as Parsons does, the unique exploitability of the patient or the peculiar power of the physician, but to see this relationship as but one dramatic case of a larger class of phenomena of basic theoretic significance which should be explicitly dealt with in systematic theory rather than given only *ad hoc* treatment in specific empirical contexts. See Talcott Parsons, *The Social System*, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1951, p. 445.

<sup>25</sup> The thesis that this is more mythological than real is developed in my introduction to Emile Durkheim, *Socialism and Saint-Simon*, translated by C. Sattler and edited by A. W. Gouldner, Yellow Springs: Antioch Press, 1958, esp. p. ix.

source of social cohesion. Characteristically focusing on the problem of social instability and change, rather than stability and cohesion, the "Marxian" tradition emphasized the opposite end of reciprocity namely, exploitation. This, I suspect, is one of the major but overlooked convergences in the history of sociological theory.

This latent convergence becomes most evident in Durkheim's lectures on "Professional Ethics and Civic Morals."<sup>26</sup> Durkheim contends that the existence of social classes, characterized by significant inequalities, in principle makes it impossible for "just" contracts to be negotiated. This system of stratification, Durkheim argues, constrains to an unequal exchange of goods and services, thereby offending the moral expectations of people in industrial societies. The exploitation rendered possible by notable disparities of power among the contracting parties encourages a sense of injustice which has socially unstabilizing consequences. Thus both Durkheim and Marx use a concept of "exploitation" for analyzing social instabilities. Durkheim, however, adds an important element that was systematically neglected by Marx, namely, that unequal exchanges of goods and services are socially disruptive because they violate certain pervasive values. But the specific nature of this value element is never fully confronted and explored by Durkheim; we must here take as problematic what Durkheim took as given.

#### COMPLEMENTARITY AND RECIPROCITY

First, however, the question of the meaning of the concept of reciprocity should be reexamined. Consideration of some of the ways in which the reciprocity problem is treated by Parsons helps to distinguish reciprocity from other cognate concepts. "It is inherent in the nature of social interaction," writes Parsons, "that the gratification of ego's need-dispositions is contingent on alter's reaction and vice versa."<sup>27</sup> Presumably, therefore, if the gratification of either party's needs is not contingent upon the other's reactions, the stability of their relation is un-

<sup>26</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals*, translated by C. Brookfield, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1958; see esp. pp. 209-214.

<sup>27</sup> Parsons, *op. cit.*, p. 21.



dermined. This, in turn, implies that if a social system is to be stable there must always be some "mutuality of gratification."<sup>28</sup> Social system stability, then, presumably depends in part on the mutually contingent exchange of gratifications, that is, on reciprocity as exchange.

This, however, remains an insight the implications of which are never systematically explored. For example, the implications of differences in the *degree* of mutuality or in the symmetry of reciprocity are neglected. Again, while the concept of "exploitation" assumes *central* importance in Parsons' commentary on the patient-doctor relation, it is never precisely defined, examined, and located in his *general* theory.

One reason for Parsons' neglect of reciprocity is that he, like some other sociologists, does not distinguish it from the concept of complementarity. Parsons uses the two concepts as if they are synonymous<sup>29</sup> and, for the most part, centers his analysis on complementarity to the systematic neglect of reciprocity rigorously construed. The term complementarity, however, is itself an ambiguous one and is not, in all of its meanings, synonymous with reciprocity. Complementarity has at least four distinct meanings:<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Talcott Parsons and Edward A. Shils, editors, *Toward a General Theory of Action*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951, p. 107.

<sup>29</sup> Parsons' tendency to equate complementarity and reciprocity may be illustrated by his comment that "Role expectations organize . . . the reciprocities, expectations, and responses to these expectations in the specific interaction systems of ego and one or more alters. This reciprocal aspect must be borne in mind since the expectations of an ego *always* imply the expectations of one or more alters. It is in this *reciprocity* or *complementarity* that sanctions enter. . . ." *Ibid.*, pp. 190-191 (my italics); see also p. 105. The burden of Parsons' analysis attends to the conditions and consequences of complementarity, by which he means that a role player requires of himself what his role partner requires of him. It is precisely for this reason that Parsons emphasizes that values must be held in common by the actors, if their expectations are to be compatible. The equation of reciprocity with complementarity is not peculiar to Parsons. It is evident in the work of other sociologists who sometimes speak of the rights and obligations in a pair of roles as "reciprocal" and other times as "complementary." And, like Parsons, others state that rights and duties, or role expectations, are *always* complementary.

<sup>30</sup> The analysis here closely follows W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950.

Complementarity<sub>1</sub> may mean that a right ( $x$ ) of Ego against Alter implies a duty ( $-x$ ) of Alter to Ego. Given the often vague use of the term "right," it is quite possible that this proposition, in one aspect, is only an expansion of some definition of the concept "right." To that degree, of course, this is simply an analytic proposition. The interesting sociological questions, however, arise only when issues of empirical substance rather than logical implication are raised. For example, where a group shares a belief that some status occupant has a certain right, say the right of a wife to receive support from her husband, does the group in fact also share a belief that the husband has an obligation to support the wife? Furthermore, even though rights may logically or empirically imply duties, it need not follow that the reverse is true. In other words, it does not follow that rights and duties are always transitive. This can be seen in a second meaning of complementarity.

Complementarity<sub>2</sub> may mean that what is a duty ( $-x$ ) of Alter to Ego implies a right ( $x$ ) of Ego against Alter. On the *empirical* level, while this is often true, of course, it is also sometimes false. For example, what may be regarded as a duty of charity or forbearance, say a duty to "turn the other cheek," need not be *socially* defined as the *right* of the recipient. While a man may be regarded as having an unconditional obligation to tell the truth to everyone, even to a confirmed liar, people in his group might not claim that the liar has a *right* to have the truth told him.

The other two meanings of complementarity differ substantially. Complementarity<sub>3</sub> may mean that a right ( $x$ ) of Alter against Ego implies a duty ( $-y$ ) of Alter to Ego. Similarly, complementarity<sub>4</sub> may mean that a duty ( $-x$ ) of Ego to Alter implies a right ( $y$ ) of Ego against Alter.

In these four implications of complementarity—sometimes called reciprocal rights and obligations—there are two distinctive types of cases. Properly speaking, *complementarity* refers only to the first two meanings sketched above, where what is a right of Ego implies an obligation of Alter, or where a duty of Alter to Ego implies a right of Ego against Alter. Only the other two meanings, however, involve true instances of



*reciprocity*, for only in these does what one party receives from the other require some return, so that giving and receiving are mutually contingent.

In short, complementarity connotes that one's rights are another's obligations, and *vice versa*. Reciprocity, however, connotes that *each* party has rights *and* duties. This is more than an analytic distinction: it is an *empirical* generalization concerning role systems the importance of which as a datum is so elemental that it is commonly neglected and rarely made problematic. The English philosopher MacBeath suggests that this empirical generalization may be accounted for by the principle of reciprocity.<sup>31</sup> This would seem possible in several senses, one of which is that, were there only rights on the one side and duties on the other, there need be no exchange whatsoever. Stated differently, it would seem that there can be stable patterns of reciprocity *qua* exchange only insofar as *each* party has both rights and duties. In effect, then, reciprocity has its significance for *role systems* in that it tends to structure *each* role so as to include both rights and duties. It is now clear, at any rate, that reciprocity is by no means identical with complementarity and that the two are confused only at theoretic peril.

#### MALINOWSKI ON RECIPROCITY

Renewing the effort to clarify the diverse meanings of reciprocity, we turn to Malinowski's seminal contribution. This is most fully elaborated in his *Crime and Custom*,<sup>32</sup> which opens with the following question: Why is it that rules of conduct in a primitive society are obeyed, even though they are hard and irksome? Even under normal conditions, the savage's compliance with his moral code is at best partial, conditional, and evasive. These, says Malinowski, are the elementary facts of ethnography, and consequently we cannot assume that the savage's conformity is due only to his awe and reverence for traditional custom, or that he slavishly and spontaneously complies with its dictates.

<sup>31</sup> Alexander MacBeath, *Experiments in Living*, London: Macmillan, 1952; see esp. pp. 127 ff.

<sup>32</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Crime and Custom in Savage Society*, London: Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1932.

Above all, Malinowski rejects the assumption that it is the sacred authority of the moral code, or the "collective conscience," which accounts for the conformity given it. It is to this anti-Durkheimian point that he directs the brunt of his polemic. Conformity, says Malinowski, is not sanctioned "by a mere psychological force, but by a definite social machinery. . . ." <sup>33</sup> Thus Malinowski expressly rejects a psychological account of conformity and seeks instead a distinctively sociological explanation.<sup>34</sup> This he finds in the "principle of reciprocity."

One of Malinowski's central theses holds that people *owe obligations to each other* and that, therefore, conformity with norms is something they *give to each other*. He notes, for example, that almost every religious or ceremonial act is regarded as an obligation between groups and living individuals, and not only to the immortal gods. For Malinowski, therefore, one meaning of reciprocity refers to the interlocking status duties which people owe one another. Thus he speaks of reciprocity as taking place "within a standing partnership, or as associated with definite social ties or coupled with mutuality in non-economic matters." <sup>35</sup>

Reciprocity also entails a "mutual dependence and [is] realized in the equivalent arrangement of reciprocal services. . . ." <sup>36</sup> Here reciprocity is conceived as the complement to and fulfillment of the division of labor. It is the pattern of exchange through which the mutual dependence of people, brought about by the division of labor, is

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>34</sup> This, by the way, is why I cannot concur in Parsons' judgment that Malinowski never disentangled a social system level of analysis from an encyclopedic concept of culture. See Talcott Parsons, "Malinowski and the Theory of Social Systems," in *Man and Culture . . .*, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-70. Malinowski's *Crime and Custom* transcends a clinical case analysis of specific primitive societies and presents a generalized and basic contribution to the theory of social systems when it addresses itself to the problem of *reciprocity*. Parsons, however, does not mention the significance of reciprocity in Malinowski's work and is able to support his claim that it ignores social system analysis only by this noteworthy omission. Parsons' neglect of the principle of reciprocity in Malinowski's work, it would seem, is consistent with his own neglect of the distinction between reciprocity and complementarity.

<sup>35</sup> Malinowski, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.



realized. Reciprocity, therefore, is a mutually gratifying pattern of exchanging goods and services.

As noted above, Malinowski speaks of reciprocity as involving an exchange of *equivalent* services; he further stresses this by insisting that "most if not all economic acts are found to belong to some chain of reciprocal gifts and counter-gifts, which in the long run balance, benefiting both sides equally."<sup>37</sup> For Malinowski, then, the exchange of goods and services is not only mutually gratifying but is equally so, "in the long run."

Speaking of the reciprocal exchange of vegetables and fish between inland communities and fishing villages, Malinowski remarks that there is a "system of mutual obligations which forces the fisherman to repay whenever he has received a gift from his inland partner, and vice versa. Neither partner can refuse, neither may stint, neither should delay."<sup>38</sup> This is seen to be related to the group's existential beliefs about reciprocity. That is, men are not regarded as blindly involving themselves in reciprocal transactions; they are viewed as having some presentiment of the consequences of reciprocity and of its breakdown. In this vein, Malinowski writes: "Though no native, however intelligent, can formulate this state of affairs in a general abstract manner, or present it as a sociological theory, yet everyone is well aware of its existence and in each concrete case he can foresee the consequences."<sup>39</sup> More specifically, it seems to be implied that people believe that (a) in the long run the mutual exchange of goods and services *will* balance out; or (b) if people do not aid those who helped them certain penalties will be imposed upon them; or (c) those whom they have helped *can* be expected to help them; or (d) some or all of these.

It is clear that two basically different elements were caught up in Malinowski's "principle of reciprocity." One of these is a set of sentiments or existential folk beliefs about

reciprocity. The other is a mutually contingent exchange of benefits or gratifications. (The latter conception converges, though it is not completely identical, with the ecological concept of symbiosis.) There is, however, a third analytically distinct element which, if implicit in Malinowski, remained murky. This is a *value* element, the same value that Durkheim, as mentioned earlier, invoked but did not clarify. Like Durkheim, Malinowski never fully disentangles it from the other elements.

In the exchanges between the fishing and the inland villages, cited above, we may suggest that each side lives up to its obligations, not simply because of constraints imposed by the division of labor with its attendant mutual dependency, but also because the partners share the higher level *moral norm*: "You *should* give benefits to those who give you benefits." Note that this norm does not simply make it unconditionally imperative, say, for the fisherman to give the inland gardeners fish. I refer here not to the *specific* obligation to give fish but rather to a *general* obligation to repay benefits.

In sum, beyond reciprocity as a pattern of exchange and beyond folk beliefs about reciprocity as a fact of life, there is another element: a generalized moral norm of reciprocity which defines certain actions and *obligations* as repayments for benefits received.

Malinowski frequently seems to confuse this general norm with the existence of complementary and concrete status rights and duties. It is theoretically necessary, however, to distinguish specific status duties from the general norm. Specific and complementary duties are owed by role partners to one another by virtue of the socially standardized roles they play. These may require an almost unconditional compliance in the sense that they are incumbent on all those in a given status simply by virtue of its occupancy. In contrast, the generalized norm of reciprocity evokes obligations toward others on the basis of their past behavior. In the first case, Ego's obligations to Alter depend upon Ego's status vis-a-vis Alter; in the second case, Ego's obligation toward Alter depend upon what Alter has done for Ego. There are certain duties that people owe one another, not as human beings, or as fellow members of a group, or even as occupants of social

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40. This is not to say, however, that Malinowski regards reciprocity *qua* transaction as *always* intended by all the actors or as something of which they are always aware. In brief—and I agree—there are both latent and manifest reciprocities.



statuses within the group but, rather, because of their prior actions. We owe others certain things because of what they have previously done for us, because of the history of previous interaction we have had with them. It is this kind of obligation which is entailed by the generalized norm of reciprocity.

## THE NORM OF RECIPROCITY

Contrary to some cultural relativists, it can be hypothesized that a norm of reciprocity is universal. As Westermarck stated, "To requite a benefit, or to be grateful to him who bestows it, is probably everywhere, at least under certain circumstances, regarded as a duty."<sup>40</sup> A norm of reciprocity is, I suspect, no less universal and important an element of culture than the incest taboo, although, similarly, its concrete formulations may vary with time and place.

Specifically, I suggest that a norm of reciprocity, in its universal form, makes two interrelated, minimal demands: (1) people should help those who have helped them, and (2) people should not injure those who have helped them. Generically, the norm of reciprocity may be conceived of as a dimension to be found in all value systems and, in particular, as one among a *number* of "Principal Components" universally present in moral codes. (The task of the sociologist, in this regard, parallels that of the physicist who seeks to identify the basic particles of matter, the conditions under which they vary, and their relations to one another.)

To suggest that a norm of reciprocity is universal is not, of course, to assert that it is unconditional. Unconditionality would, indeed, be at variance with the basic character of the reciprocity norm which imposes obligations only contingently, that is, in response to the benefits conferred by others. Moreover, such obligations of repayment are contingent upon the imputed *value* of the benefit received. The value of the benefit and hence the debt is in proportion to and varies with—among other things—the intensity of the recipient's need at the time the benefit was bestowed ("a friend in need . . ."), the resources of the donor ("he gave although

he could ill afford it"), the motives imputed to the donor ("without thought of gain"), and the nature of the constraints which are perceived to exist or to be absent ("he gave of his own free will . . ."). Thus the obligations imposed by the norm of reciprocity may vary with the *status* of the participants within a society.

Similarly, this norm functions differently in some degree in different *cultures*. In the Philippines, for example, the *compadre* system cuts across and pervades the political, economic, and other institutional spheres. *Compadres* are bound by a norm of reciprocity. If one man pays his *compadre's* doctor's bill in time of need, for example, the latter may be obligated to help the former's son to get a government job. Here the tendency to govern all relations by the norm of reciprocity, thereby undermining bureaucratic impersonality, is relatively legitimate, hence overt and powerful. In the United States, however, such tendencies are weaker, in part because friendship relations are less institutionalized. Nonetheless, even in bureaucracies in this country such tendencies are endemic, albeit less legitimate and overt. Except in friendship, kinship, and neighborly relations, a norm of reciprocity is not imposed on Americans by the "dominant cultural profile," although it is commonly found in the latent or "substitute" culture structure in all institutional sectors, even the most rationalized, in the United States.

In otherwise contrasting discussions of the norm of reciprocity one emphasis is notable. Some scholars, especially Homans, Thurwald, Simmel, and Malinowski, assert or imply that the reciprocity norm stipulates that the amount of the return to be made is "roughly equivalent" to what had been received. The problem of equivalence is a difficult but important one. Whether in fact there is a reciprocity norm specifically requiring that returns for benefits received be *equivalent* is an empirical question. So, too, is the problem of whether such a norm is part of or distinct from a more general norm which simply requires that one return some (unspecified) benefits to benefactors. Logically prior to such empirical problems, however, is the question of what the meaning of

<sup>40</sup> Edward Westermarck, *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*, London: Macmillan, 1908, Vol. 2, p. 154.



equivalence would be in the former norm of equivalent reciprocity.

Equivalence may have at least two forms, the sociological and psychodynamic significance of which are apt to be quite distinct. In the first case, heteromorphic reciprocity, equivalence may mean that the things exchanged may be concretely different but should be equal in *value*, as defined by the actors in the situation. In the second case, homeomorphic reciprocity, equivalence may mean that exchanges should be concretely alike, or identical in form, either with respect to the things exchanged or to the circumstances under which they are exchanged. In the former, equivalence calls for "tit for tat"; in the latter, equivalence calls for "tat for tat." Historically, the most important expression of homeomorphic reciprocity is found in the *negative* norms of reciprocity, that is, in sentiments of retaliation where the emphasis is placed not on the return of benefits but on the return of injuries, and is best exemplified by the *lex talionis*.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, it should be stressed that equivalence in the above cases refers to a definition of the exchangeables made by actors in the situation. This differs of course, from holding that the things exchanged by people, in the long run, will be *objectively* equal in value, as measured by economists or other social scientists. Here, again, the adequacy of these conceptual distinctions will be determined ultimately by empirical test. For example, can we find reciprocity norms which, in fact, require that returns be equivalent in value and are these empirically distinguishable from norms requiring that returns be concretely alike? Are these uni-dimensional or multi-dimensional? Similarly, only research can resolve the question whether a norm of retaliation exists in any given group, is the polar side of the norm of reciprocity, or is a distinctive norm which may vary independently of the reciprocity norm. These conceptual distinctions only suggest a set

<sup>41</sup> It is further indicative of our terminological difficulties in this area that this is often what Piaget spoke of as "reciprocity." For example, ". . . reciprocity stands so high in the eyes of the child that he will apply it even where to us it seems to border on crude vengeance." J. Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1932, p. 216.

of research possibilities and have value primarily as guides to investigation.<sup>42</sup>

#### RECIPROCITY AND SOCIAL SYSTEMS

As mentioned above, sociologists have sometimes confused the notion of complementarity with that of reciprocity and have recently tended to focus on the former. Presumably, the reason for this is because of the importance of complementarity in maintaining the stability of social systems. Clearly, if what one party deems his right is accepted by the other as his obligation, their relation will be more stable than if the latter fails to so define it. But if the group stabilizing consequences of complementarity are the basis of its theoretical significance, then the same consideration underwrites with equal potency the significance of reciprocity. For reciprocity has no less a role in maintaining the stability of social systems.

Note that there are at least two ways, not merely one, in which complementarity as such can break down. In the one case, Alter can refuse to acknowledge Ego's rights as his own duties. In the other case, however, Ego may not regard as rights that which Alter acknowledges as duties. The former is commonly viewed as the empirically more frequent and as the theoretically more significant case. That this often seems to be

<sup>42</sup> A further point that fuller discussion should develop concerns the terms "roughly" equivalent. Use of the term "roughly," in one part, indicates that a certain range of concrete behavior will be viewed by the actors as compliance with this reciprocity norm and that more than one specific return will be acceptable and defined as equivalent. The norm of reciprocity *qua* equivalence is thus like most other norms which also tolerate a range of variability. The demand for *exact* equality would place an impossible burden even on actors highly motivated to comply with the reciprocity norm and would yield endemic tensions. Conversely, a notion of "rough" equivalence held by the actors allows for easier compliance with the norm and can be regarded as one of the mechanisms sustaining it. Recognition that the requirement is for "rough" equivalence, however, should not be allowed to obscure the fact that there may be a specific reciprocity norm which does in fact call for equivalence. This would be a distinguishing feature of the hypothesized norm and should no more be concealed by reference to a "rough" equivalent than should the distinctive content of any other norm be obscured by the fact that a variable range of behaviors will be acceptable to those holding it.



taken as a matter of course suggests the presence of certain tacit assumptions about basic human dispositions. It seems to assume, as Aristotle put it, that people are more ready to receive than to give benefits. In short, it premises a common tendency toward what used to be called "egoism," a salient (but not exclusive) concern with the satisfaction of one's own needs.

This or some cognate assumption appears to be eminently reasonable and empirically justified. There can be no adequate systematic sociological theory which boggles at the issue; indeed, it is one of the many virtues of Parsons' work that it confronts the egoism problem. His solution seems to be sidetracked, however, because his overwhelming focus on the problem of complementarity leads to the neglect of reciprocity. If assumptions about egoistic dispositions are valid, however, a complementarity of rights and obligations should be exposed to a persistent strain, in which each party is somewhat more actively concerned to defend or extend his own rights than those of others. There is nothing in complementarity as such which would seem able to control egoism.

One way out may be obtained by premising that socialization internalizes complementary rights and obligations in persons, before they fully assume responsible participation in a social system. Even if socialization were to work perfectly and so internalize such rights and obligations, there still remains the question as to what mechanism can sustain and reinforce these during full participation in the social system. The concept of complementarity takes mutually compatible expectations as given; it does not and cannot explain how they are maintained once established. For this we need to turn to the reciprocities processes because these, unlike pure complementarity, actually mobilize egoistic motivations and channel them into the maintenance of the social system. Benthamite utilitarianism has long understood that egoism can motivate one party to satisfy the expectations of the other, since by doing so he induces the latter to reciprocate and to satisfy his own. As Max Gluckman might put it with his penchant for Hegelian paradox, there is an altruism in egoism, made possible through reciprocity.

Furthermore, the existential belief in reci-

procity says something like this, "People will usually help those who help them." Similarly, the *norm* of reciprocity holds that people should help those who help them and, therefore, those whom you have helped have an obligation to help you. The conclusion is clear: if you want to be helped by others you must help them; hence it is not only proper but also expedient to conform with the specific status rights of others and with the general norm. Both the existential belief in and the norm of reciprocity enlist egoistic motivations in the service of social system stability.<sup>43</sup>

A full analysis of the ways in which the whole reciprocities complex is involved in the maintenance of social systems would require consideration of the linkages between each of its various elements, and their relation to other general properties of social systems. There is no space for such consideration here. Instead, I examine only one part of the complex, namely, the generalized *norm* of reciprocity, and suggest some of the ways in which it contributes to social system stability.

If, following Parsons, we suppose that social systems are stable to the extent that Ego and Alter conform with one another's expectations, we are confronted with the problem of why men *reciprocate* gratifications. Parsons holds that once a stable relation of mutual gratification has been established the system is self-perpetuating; presumably, no special mechanisms are necessary to maintain it. Insofar as this is not simply postulated in analogy with the principle of inertia in physics, apparently reciprocity is accounted for by Parsons, and also by Homans, as a result of the development of a beneficent cycle of mutual reinforcement. That is, Ego's conformity with Alter's

<sup>43</sup> I suppose that one can take two different attitudes toward this transmutation of the base metal of egoism. One can deplore the situation and say with Eliot:

"The last temptation is the greatest treason;  
To do the right thing for the wrong reason."

Or one can adopt the older and perhaps sociologically wiser view that here, once more, "private vices make public benefits," and provide an indispensable basis for the *spontaneous self-regulation* of social systems.



expectations reinforces Alter's conformity with Ego's expectations, and so on.

This explanation of reciprocity *qua* transaction is particularly strange in Parsons' case since he often stresses, but here neglects, the significance of shared values as a source of stability in social systems. So far as the question here is not simply the general one of why men conform with the expectations of others but, rather, the more specific problem of why they *reciprocate* benefits, part of the answer would seem to be that they have commonly internalized some general *moral norm*. In short, the suggestion is that the motivation for reciprocity stems not only from the sheer gratification which Alter receives from Ego but also from Alter's internalization of a specific norm of reciprocity which morally obliges him to give benefits to those from whom he has received them. In this respect, the *norm* of reciprocity is a concrete and special mechanism involved in the maintenance of any stable social system.

Why should such a norm be necessary? Why is it that expedient considerations do not suffice to mobilize motivations to comply with other's expectations, thereby inducing them to provide reciprocal compliances? One major line of analysis here would certainly indicate the disruptive potentialities of power differences. Given significant power differences, egoistic motivations may seek to get benefits without returning them. (It is notable that Parsons fails to define the power situation in his basic model of Ego-Alter equilibrium.) The situation is then ripe for the breakdown of reciprocity and for the development of system-disrupting exploitation. The norm of reciprocity, however, engenders motives for returning benefits even when power differences might invite exploitation. The norm thus safeguards powerful people against the temptations of their own status; it motivates and regulates reciprocity as an exchange pattern, serving to inhibit the emergence of exploitative relations which would undermine the social system and the very power arrangements which had made exploitation possible.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> This line of analysis is further strengthened if we consider the possibility that Ego's continued conformity with Alter's expectations may eventually lead Alter to take Ego's conformity for "granted" and thus lead Alter to reciprocate less for later acts

As we have seen, Parsons stresses that the stability of social systems largely derives from the *conformity* of role partners to each other's expectations, particularly when they do their duty to one another. This formulation induces a focus on conformity and deviance, and the degrees and types of each. Presumably, the more that people pay their social debts the more stable the social system. But much more than conformity and deviance are involved here.

The idea of the reciprocities complex leads us to the historical or genetic dimension of social interaction. For example, Malinowski, in his discussion of the Kula Ring, carefully notes that the gifts given are not immediately returned and repayment may take as long as a year. What is the significance of this intervening time period? It is a period governed by the norm of reciprocity in a double sense. First, the actor is accumulating, mobilizing, liquidating, or earmarking resources so that he can make a suitable repayment. Second, it is a period governed by the rule that you should not do harm to those who have done you a benefit. This is a time, then, when men are morally constrained to manifest their gratitude toward, or at least to maintain peace with, their benefactors.

Insofar as men live under such a rule of reciprocity, when one party benefits another, an obligation is generated. The recipient is now *indebted* to the donor, and he remains so until he repays. Once interaction is seen as taking place over time, we may note that the norm of reciprocity so structures social relations that, between the time of Ego's provision of a gratification and the time of Alter's repayment, falls the shadow of indebtedness. An adequate analysis of the

of conformity by Ego. In short, the value of Ego's conformity may undergo an inflationary spiral in which his later conforming actions are worth less than earlier ones, in terms of the reciprocities they yield. As reciprocities tend to decline, the social system may experience mounting strain, either collapsing in apathy or being disrupted by conflict. In this connection, the general norm of reciprocity may serve as a brake, slowing the rate at which reciprocities decline or preventing them from declining beyond a certain (unknown) level, and thus contributing to the stability of the system. This is more fully developed in A. W. Gouldner, "Organizational Analysis," in R. K. Merton *et al.*, editors, *Sociology Today*, New York: Basic Books, 1959, esp. pp. 423 ff.



dynamics of social interaction is thus required to go beyond the question of deviance from or conformity with the parties' obligations to one another. A second basic dimension needs to be examined systematically, namely, the time period when there is an obligation still to be performed, when commitments which have been made are yet to be fulfilled.

These outstanding obligations, no less than those already given compliance, contribute substantially to the stability of social systems. It is obviously inexpedient for creditors to break off relationships with those who have outstanding obligations to them. It may also be inexpedient for *debtors* to do so because their creditors may not again allow them to run up a bill of social indebtedness. In addition, it is *morally* improper, under the norm of reciprocity, to break off relations or to launch hostilities against those to whom you are still indebted.

If this conclusion is correct, then we should not only look for mechanisms which constrain or motivate men to do their duty and to pay off their debts. We should also expect to find mechanisms which induce people to *remain* socially indebted to each other and which *inhibit* their complete repayment. This suggests another function performed by the requirement of only *rough* equivalence of repayment that may be involved in one of the norms of reciprocity. For it induces a certain amount of ambiguity as to whether indebtedness has been repaid and, over time, generates uncertainty about who is in whose debt.<sup>45</sup> This all hinges, however, on a shared

conception of the moral propriety of repayment, engendered by the norm of reciprocity.

Still another way in which the general norm of reciprocity is implicated in the maintenance of social system stability is related to an important attribute of the norm, namely, its comparative indeterminacy. Unlike specific status duties and like other general norms, this norm does not require highly specific and uniform performances from people whose behavior it regulates. For example, unlike the status duties of American wives, it does not call upon them to cook and to take care of the children. Instead, the concrete demands it makes change substantially from situation to situation and vary with the benefits which one party receives from another.

This indeterminacy enables the norm of reciprocity to perform some of its most important system-stabilizing functions. Being indeterminate, the norm can be applied to countless *ad hoc* transactions, thus providing a flexible moral sanction for transactions which might not otherwise be regulated by specific status obligations. The norm, in this respect, is a kind of plastic filler, capable of being poured into the shifting crevices of social structures, and serving as a kind of all-purpose moral cement.

Not only does the norm of reciprocity play a stabilizing role in human relations in the *absence* of a well developed system of specific status duties, but it contributes to social stability even when these are *present* and well established. Status duties shape behavior because the status occupant believes them binding in their own right; they possess a kind of *prima facie* legitimacy for properly socialized group members. The general norm of reciprocity, however, is a second-order defense of stability; it provides a further source of motivation and an additional moral sanction for conforming with specific status

<sup>45</sup> An interesting case of a mechanism serving to create and maintain outstanding obligations is part of the Vartan Bhanji, a form of ritual gift exchange in Pakistan and other parts of India. Eglar's study of this pattern makes it clear that a fundamental rule of Vartan Bhanji is reciprocity, that a gift should be returned for a gift, and a favor for a favor. It is also notable that the system painstakingly prevents the total elimination of outstanding obligations. Thus, on the occasion of a marriage, departing guests are given gifts of sweets. In weighing them out, the hostess may say, "These five are yours," meaning "these are a repayment for what you formerly gave me," and she then adds an extra measure, saying, "These are mine." On the next occasion, she will receive these back along with an additional measure which she later returns, and so on. See Z. E. Eglar, *Vartan Bhanji: Institu-*

*tionalized Reciprocity in a Changing Punjab Village*, Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University, 1958.

Other mechanisms for maintaining outstanding obligations may be found in cultural prescriptions which require men not to be overly eager to repay their social obligations. It still seems to be understood that there is a certain impropriety in this, even if we do not go as far as Seneca in holding that "a person who wants to repay a gift too quickly with a gift in return is an unwilling debtor and an ungrateful person."



obligations. For example, the employer may pay his workers not merely because he has contracted to do so; he may also feel that the workman has earned his wages. The housewife may take pains with her husband's meals not merely because cooking may be incumbent on her as a wife; she may also have a particularly considerate husband. In each case, the specific status duties are complied with not only because they are inherent in the status and are believed to be right in themselves, but also because each is further defined as a "repayment." In sum, the norm of reciprocity requires that if others have been fulfilling their status duties to you, you in turn have an additional or second-order obligation (repayment) to fulfill your status duties to them. In this manner, the sentiment of gratitude joins forces with the sentiment of rectitude and adds a safety-margin in the motivation to conformity.

The matter can be put differently from the standpoint of potential deviance or non-conformity. All status obligations are vulnerable to challenge and, at times, may have to be justified. If, for any reason, people refuse to do their duty, those demanding compliance may be required to justify their claims. Obviously, there are many standardized ways in which this might be done. Invoking the general norm of reciprocity is one way of justifying the more concrete demands of status obligations. Forced to the wall, the man demanding his "rights," may say, in effect, "Very well, if you won't do this simply because it is your duty, then remember all that I have done for you in the past and do it to repay your debt to me." The norm of reciprocity thus provides a second-order defense of the stability of social systems in that it can be used to overcome incipient deviance and to mobilize auxiliary motivations for conformity with existent status demands.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>46</sup> A cogent illustration of this is provided by William F. Whyte: "When life in the group runs smoothly, the obligations binding members are not explicitly recognized. . . . It is only when the relationship breaks down that the underlying obligations are brought to light. While Alec and Frank were friends I never heard either one of them discuss the services he was performing for the other, but when they had a falling out . . . each man complained to Doc that the other was not acting as he should in view of the services which had been

#### STARTING MECHANISMS

Two distinct points have been made about the social functions of the norm of reciprocity. One is that this norm serves a group *stabilizing* function and thus is quite familiar in functional theory. The second point, however, is the view that the norm is not only in some sense a defense or stabilizing mechanism but is also what may be called a "starting mechanism." That is, it helps to initiate social interaction and is functional in the early phases of certain groups before they have developed a differentiated and customary set of status duties.

In speaking of the norm of reciprocity as a "starting mechanism," indeed in conceiving of starting mechanisms, we find ourselves outside the usual perspective of functional theory. Functional theory commonly focuses on already-established, on-going systems, and on the mechanisms by means of which an established social system is enabled to maintain itself. Although functional theory is concerned with the problems of how individual actors are prepared by socialization to play a role in social systems, its general theoretical models rarely, if ever, include systematic treatment of the beginnings of a social system as such and, consequently, do not formally raise the question of the nature of the mechanisms needed to start such a system.<sup>47</sup>

done for him." *Street Corner Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945, p. 256.

<sup>47</sup> Modern functionalism emerged in a world in which Newtonian mechanics was the overshadowing scientific achievement and a basic model for the development of social science. The Newtonian standpoint was not, of course, a cosmology concerned with the question of planetary origins but took the existent relations among planets as given. Today, however, two developments of global significance encourage and perhaps require a shift in social perspectives. In one, rocket engineering, the question is raised as to how new, man-made, planets may be "shot" into stable orbits. Secondly, international politics require us to help "underdeveloped" countries to *begin* a beneficent cycle of capital accumulation which will be self-sustaining. In both instances, practical "engineering" problems forcefully direct attention to the question of "starting mechanisms" and would seem likely to heighten dissatisfaction with general sociological models that largely confine themselves to already established systems.



Every social system of course has a history, which means that it has had its beginnings even if these are shrouded in antiquity. Granted that the question of origins can readily bog down in a metaphysical morass, the fact is that many concrete social systems do have determinate beginnings. Marriages are not made in heaven, and whether they end in divorce or continue in bliss, they have some identifiable origins. Similarly, corporations, political parties, and all manner of groups have their beginnings. (Recent studies of friendship and other interpersonal relations in housing projects have begun to explore this problem.)

People are continually brought together in new juxtapositions and combinations, bringing with them the possibilities of new social systems. How are these possibilities realized? Is such realization entirely a random matter? These are the kinds of questions that were familiar to the earlier students of "collective behavior," who, in focusing on crowds, riots, and rumors, were often primarily concerned with investigating the development of groups in *statu nascendi*.<sup>48</sup> Although this perspective may at first seem somewhat alien to the functionalist, once it is put to him, he may suspect that certain kinds of mechanisms, conducive to the crystallization of social systems out of ephemeral contacts, will in some measure be institutionalized or otherwise patterned in any society. At this point he would be considering "starting mechanisms." In this way, I suggest, the norm of reciprocity provides one among many starting mechanisms.

From the standpoint of a purely economic or utilitarian model,<sup>49</sup> there are certain difficulties in accounting for the manner in which social interaction begins. Let us suppose two people or groups, Ego and Alter, each possesses valuables sought by the other. Suppose further that each feels that the only motive the other has to conduct an ex-

change is the anticipated gratification it will bring. Each may then feel that it would be advantageous to lay hold of the other's valuables without relinquishing his own. Furthermore, suppose that each party suspects the other of precisely such an intention, perhaps because of the operation of projective or empathic mechanisms. At least since Hobbes, it has been recognized that under such circumstances, each is likely to regard the impending exchange as dangerous and to view the other with some suspicion.<sup>50</sup> Each may then hesitate to part with his valuables before the other has first turned his over. Like participants in a disarmament conference, each may say to other, "You first!" Thus the exchange may be delayed or altogether flounder and the relationship may be prevented from developing.

The norm of reciprocity may serve as a starting mechanism in such circumstances by preventing or enabling the parties to break out of this impasse. When internalized in both parties, the norm *obliges* the one who has first received a benefit to repay it at some time; it thus provides some realistic grounds for confidence, in the one who first parts with his valuables, that he will be repaid. Consequently, there may be less hesitancy in being the first and a greater facility with which the exchange and the social relation can get underway.

#### CONCLUSION

I have limited this discussion of the norm of reciprocity to its functions and its contribution to the stability of social systems, omitting examination of its dysfunctions and of the manner in which it induces tensions and changes in social systems. That the norm commonly imposes obligations of reciprocity only "when the individual is able" to reciprocate does not guarantee agreement concerning the individual's "ability." Furthermore there may be occasions when questions as to whether the individual's return is appropriate or sufficient (apart from whether it is equivalent) that arise by virtue of the absence of common yardsticks in terms of which

<sup>48</sup> I am indebted to Howard S. Becker for this and many other insights into what seemed to be the guiding impulses of the "Chicago School" of collective behavior.

<sup>49</sup> Some indications of the utilitarian approach to this problem may be derived from the stimulating paper by T. C. Schelling, "An Essay on Bargaining," *American Economic Review*, 46 (June, 1956), pp. 281-306.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. M. Deutsch, "A Study of Conditions Affecting Cooperation," New York: Research Center for Human Relations, 1955, p. 25, dittoed.



giving and returning may be compared. Moreover, the norm may lead individuals to establish relations only or primarily with those who can reciprocate, thus inducing neglect of the needs of those unable to do so. Clearly, the norm of reciprocity cannot apply with full force in relations with children, old

people, or with those who are mentally or physically handicapped, and it is theoretically inferable that other, fundamentally different kinds of normative orientations will develop in moral codes. I hope to explore these and related problems in subsequent discussions.

## STRUCTURAL EFFECTS

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*In empirical research, social structures are usually characterized, explicitly or implicitly, by frequency distributions of behavior of individuals or relationships among them. Thus, the common culture refers to prevailing values, and group cohesiveness, to pervasive interpersonal bonds. To isolate the external constraints of social values from the influences of the individual's internalized values, that the prevalence of a value in a group is associated with social conduct when this value is held constant for individuals must be demonstrated. Data from a public assistance agency show that the prevailing values in a work group had such structural effects. In some cases, the group value and the individual's orientation had similar, but independent, effects on his conduct; in other cases, they had opposite effects; in still others, the effects of the individual's orientation were contingent on the prevalence of this orientation in the group, a pattern which identifies characteristics associated with deviancy. The same procedure was used to isolate the structural effects of cohesiveness and of the communication network.*

TWO basic types of social fact can be distinguished: the common values and norms embodied in a culture or sub-culture; and the networks of social relations in which processes of social interaction become organized and through which social positions of individuals and subgroups become differentiated.<sup>1</sup> Kroeber and Parsons have recently re-emphasized the importance of this analytical distinction.<sup>2</sup> Many theoretical concepts illustrate the distinction: Weber's Protestant ethic and Sumner's mores exemplify social values and norms, while Marx's investigation of the class structure and Simmel's study of coalitions in triads deal with networks of social relationships.

These concepts refer to attributes of social collectivities, not to those of individuals, but they have counterparts that do refer to characteristics of individuals. Individuals can be described in terms of their orientations and

dispositions, just as groups or entire societies can be described in terms of the prevailing social values and norms; and individuals can be distinguished on the basis of their social status, just as communities can be distinguished on the basis of the status distribution in them.<sup>3</sup> These parallels tend to conceal the fundamental difference between the implications of group structure and those of the individual's own characteristics for his conduct. Even socially acquired or socially defined attributes of individuals are clearly distinct in their effects from attributes of social structures.

Systematic social research has often been criticized for distorting, if not entirely ignoring, crucial characteristics of social structure.<sup>4</sup> Interviewing surveys have provided

<sup>1</sup> The relationships between measures of individual attributes and of group attributes are discussed by Patricia L. Kendall and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, "Problems of Survey Analysis," in Robert K. Merton and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, editors, *Continuities in Social Research*, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950, pp. 187-196.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Herbert Blumer, "Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling," *American Sociological Review* 13 (October, 1948), pp. 542-549.

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Robin M. Williams, Jr., *American Society*, New York: Knopf, 1951, pp. 443-448.

<sup>2</sup> A. L. Kroeber and Talcott Parsons, "The Concepts of Culture and of Social System," *American Sociological Review*, 23 (October, 1958), pp. 582-583.