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CONSENSUS AND MASS COMMUNICATION*

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ON SUCH an occasion as this it is customary to offer a discourse on one's favorite topic, under unusual conditions of freedom bordering on license. If one is so inclined, he is even permitted to preach a sermon, though it is well to remember that the congregation is free to depart before the benediction.

At a time like the present it is tempting to exhort one's fellows in the scientific world to live up to the great responsibilities which the sorry state of the world might be presumed to devolve upon them. The physical knowledge that threatens to destroy us is obviously not matched by social knowledge requisite to save civilization, and in so far as the future of mankind depends upon such knowledge, we must confess that we do not have enough of it to give.

There may be some among us who feel that we already have the knowledge to prevent disaster but that we lack the power to put that knowledge into effect. Such a claim, however, is a confession that we lack perhaps the most important knowledge that we need, namely, the knowledge to unlock the power requisite to put our existing knowledge usefully to work. The many problems of the present day social world call for a kind of knowledge comparable to the knowledge of the physical world recently discovered

which led to the atomic bomb, on the one hand, and which promises to lead to the harnessing of atomic energy for peaceful purposes on the other hand. The great task before us is to discover the ways and means of mobilizing human action to prevent the suicide of civilization in the face of the new physical power which has recently been discovered to make that eventuality at least a threatening possibility. After we have tried our best to obtain such knowledge as can be obtained there is still time to worry about how to put that knowledge to use in the exercise of power.

Perhaps it is a temperamental trait rather than an orthodox tradition of science to turn in a period of turmoil away from the problems of the world to the problems of science, and, as we customarily say, to take the long view and devote one's self to the building up of a body of knowledge which may or may not be relevant to the problems of life, but which satisfies one's intellectual curiosity. It is curious that in order to gain the reputation as a realist, it is regarded best never to think about reality, and in order to be regarded as a social scientist to get as far away from the actual problems and operations of society as you can.

Happy are those who can find this refuge. It is easier and safer, to be sure, to withdraw into the study chamber or the laboratory when the world is on fire, provided the insulation from the world is suf-

* The Presidential Address read before the annual meeting of the American Sociological Society, New York City, New York, December 28-30, 1947.

ficiently fireproof. It is easier, also, for the physical and biological scientist to find such insulation than it is for the social scientist. This is partly due to the nature of the subject matter and partly due to the traditions of science and scholarship in these fields themselves. The scientific study of social phenomena is not yet institutionalized like the study of physical and biological phenomena. The student of society will be plagued by the difficulties of achieving "objectivity," by the existence of social values, by the competition with common sense knowledge, by the limits of his freedom and capacity to experiment, and by other serious and peculiar handicaps which trouble the natural scientist less or not at all. But the social scientist, whose very subject matter is the social world, can avoid studying the processes and problems of man in society only by pretending to be something he is not, or by lapsing into such a remote degree of abstraction or triviality as to make the resemblance between what he does and what he professes to be doing purely coincidental.

The favorite topic of the present speaker, you will be surprised to discover, happens to be sociology, which, since it is a broad field and will tax your patience if expounded in detail, calls for some selection. I have chosen to discuss the topic of consensus because I believe it provides both an approach to the central problem of sociology and to the problems of the contemporary world. I regard the study of consensus as the central task of sociology, which is to understand the behavior of men in so far as that behavior is influenced by group life. Because the mark of any society is the capacity of its members to understand one another and to act in concert toward common objectives and under common norms, the analysis of consensus rightly constitutes the focus of sociological investigation. But to discuss the nature of consensus in all kinds of human groups in different cultural settings would be a formidable task. Similarly, an analysis of the conditions conducive to consensus under varying circumstances would be a vast undertaking. My observations will therefore be directed to the conditions under which con-

sensus functions in mass societies as distinguished from more compact, intimate groups, such as the family and other primary associations.

Before exploring the nature and conditions of consensus, it seems appropriate to indicate the salient characteristics of mass societies. As we look back upon previous social aggregations, such as those of the ancient kingdoms, or at their greatest extent the Roman Empire, we wonder how, given the primitive communications that obtained, such impressive numbers and territories could be held together under a common regime over any considerable span of time. If we discover, however, that these aggregations were not truly societies but were little more than administrative areas, creatures of military domination along the main arteries of communication from some center of power, and that the economic base of their cohesion rested on exploitation of the outlying territories and peoples by the power holders at a center through their representatives who were scattered thinly over the territory, the magnitude of these aggregations does not seem too impressive. Mass societies as we find them today, however, show greater marks of integration. They are aggregations of people who participate to a much greater degree in the common life and, at least in democratic parts of the world, comprise people whose attitudes, sentiments and opinions have some bearing upon the policies pursued by their governments. In this sense mass societies are a creation of the modern age and are the product of the division of labor, of mass communication and a more or less democratically achieved consensus.

II

Since we shall speak of our society as a mass society and of the communication that it involves as mass communication, it behooves us to depict the characteristics of the mass. Its most obvious trait is that it involves great numbers, in contradistinction to the smaller aggregates with which we have become familiar through the study of primitive life and earlier historical forms of human association. Second, and again, almost by defi-

dition, it consists of aggregates of men widely dispersed over the face of the earth, as distinguished from the compact local groups of former periods. Third, the mass is composed of heterogeneous members, in that it includes people living under widely different conditions, under widely varying cultures, coming from diverse strata of society, occupying different positions, engaging in different occupations, and hence having different interests, standards of life and degrees of prestige, power and influence. Fourth, the mass is an aggregate of anonymous individuals, as may be indicated by the fact that though millions of individuals listening to a radio program, reading a newspaper, or seeing a movie, are exposed to the same images, they are not aware of who the fellow members of the audience are, nor are those who transmit these images certain of the composition of their audience. These anonymous persons who constitute the mass may be, and usually are, of course, aware that they are part of a mass and they make some assumptions as to who their fellow members are and how many of them there are. They are likewise capable of identifying themselves with their anonymous fellows who are exposed to the same images and may even gain some support from the knowledge of their existence. They may even act as if they had their unanimous support as is illustrated by the slogan "Fifty million Frenchmen can't be wrong," or by the much disputed bandwagon effect resulting from the publication of the results of public opinion polls. Fifth, the mass does not constitute an organized group. It is without recognized leadership and a well-defined program of action. If it acts collectively at all it does so only as a crowd or as a mob, but since it is dispersed in space it cannot even move as these elementary social bodies are capable of action, although it may be far from constituting, as Carlyle thought, "an inert lump." Sixth, the mass has no common customs or traditions, no institutions and no rules governing the action of the individuals. Hence, it is open to suggestions, and its behavior, to a greater degree than that of organized bodies, is capricious and unpredictable. And, finally,

the mass consists of unattached individuals, or, at best, individuals who, for the time being, behave not as members of a group, playing specific roles representative of their position in that group, but rather as discrete entities. In modern urban industrial society, our membership in each of the multiple organizations to which we belong represents our interests only in some limited aspect of our total personal life. There is no group which even remotely professes to speak for us in our total capacity as men or in all of the roles that we play. Although through our membership in these organized groups we become articulate, contribute to the moulding of public opinion, and participate more or less actively in the determination of social policies, there remains for all of us a quite considerable range of ideas and ideals which are subject to manipulation from the outside and in reference to which there is no appreciable reciprocal interaction between ourselves and others similarly situated. It is this area of life which furnishes the opportunity for others to entrap us or to lead us toward goals with the formulation of which we have had little or nothing whatever to do. Hence, all of us are in some respects characterized in our conduct by mass behavior.

The fragmentation of human interests in heterogeneous, complex modern societies is so far advanced that as Robert E. Park put it, "What a man belongs to constitutes most of his life career and all of his obituary." The trend in group organization is not merely toward the multiplication and diversification of organizations, but also toward bodies of enormously increased size. We have witnessed in recent decades the development of numerous giant organizations in business and industry, in labor, in the professions, in religion, in government and in social life which seem to dominate our existence and to characterize our civilization.

Many of these organizations have become so colossal that they themselves come to approximate masses. The sense of belonging and of participation which smaller and more compactly organized groups are able to generate is hence largely frustrated by the

very size of the typical organizations of our time. This is perhaps a price we must be willing to pay for living in an interdependent and technologically highly advanced world. But it should also constitute a major challenge to the analytical skill and the inventive imagination of social scientists, especially sociologists, for it is to a large extent upon the ability to maintain effective contact between the members and two-way communication between the leaders and the membership of these giant structures that the future of democracy rests.

The problem is complicated by the fact that not only is mass democratic society enormous in scope and intricate in structure, but it presents a dynamic equilibrium in which one of the principal conditions of effective collective action is the accuracy and speed with which the shifting interests and attitudes of great masses of men, whether organized or unorganized, can be ascertained and brought to bear upon the determination of policy.

Another significant feature of modern mass society, and especially of mass democracies, is the instability of the interests and the motives of the members, and the correspondingly frequent changes in leadership and the consequent uncertainty as to the locus of decisive power at any one juncture of events. If the spokesmen in any group are to know whom they are speaking for they must be able to assess how strong or enduring the interests are that they profess to represent, and whether, indeed, the groups for which they speak are at all interested in the issue.

Mass societies, furthermore, involve vast concentrations of power and authority and complicated machinery of administration. Perhaps the most urgent need that goes unmet in such a society is the capacity for prompt decisions in the face of recurrent crises. The fact that concerted action in such societies, if they are to remain democratic, must take into consideration the shifting constellation of public opinion imposes upon those who guide its destinies a responsibility which can only be met by the utilization of all the relevant sources of knowl-

edge and the perfection of very much more advanced techniques than we now seem to possess.

III

When a social philosopher of the previous generation, Herbert Spencer, undertook to compare human society with the biological organism, he thought he had found that the one thing which human society lacked to make it truly comparable to a biological organism, was a social sensorium which would serve as the equivalent of the central nervous system and "the mind" in the individual organism. Whatever we may think about such analogies, this alleged lack of a social mind to go with the social body is the deficiency that we must supply if organized social life, on the scale on which we must now live it, is to endure. The only reasonable equivalent of "mind" in the individual organism that we can think of as an essential in the social organism can be supplied through consensus.

A thoughtful student has described society as "a highly intricate network of partial or complete understandings between the members of organizational units."¹ Consensus is the sign that such partial or complete understanding has been reached on a number of issues confronting the members of a group sufficient to entitle it to be called a society. It implies that a measure of agreement has been reached. The agreement, however, is neither imposed by coercion nor fixed by custom so as no longer to be subject to discussion. It is always partial and developing and has constantly to be won. It results from the interpenetration of views based upon mutual consent and upon feeling as well as thinking together.

If men of diverse experiences and interests are to have ideas and ideals in common they must have the ability to communicate. It is precisely here, however, that we encounter a paradox. In order to communicate effectively with one another, we must have common knowledge, but in a mass

¹ Edward Sapir: *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, "Communication."

society it is through communication that we must obtain this common body of knowledge. The resolution of this paradox seems to lie in the possibility that though men of diverse backgrounds, experiences and interests, when they first come in contact, are incapable of communicating with and understanding one another, much less arriving at agreement, they must initially be content to grope haltingly for such elementary understandings as can be supplied on the basis of the scanty and superficial common experiences that even the most casual and superficial contact supplies. They must and do live in the hope that as that experience is widened and deepened there will take place a parallel improvement in effective communication.

We live on the assumption that human beings the world over are sufficiently alike in their basic nature and their life careers that even the most alien groups in contact with one another, no matter how indirectly and remotely, will have some elementary capacity to put themselves in the place of the other, that the common understanding that comes through communication will have a cumulative effect, and that every step toward understanding becomes the basis for a still broader and deeper basis of understanding.

Modern society exhibits two major aspects. On the one hand, it consists of organized groups, ranging from informally constituted intimate groups to highly formalized organizations, such as the modern corporation, the union, the church and the state. On the other hand, there are the detached masses that are held together, if at all by the mass media of communication. The analysis of consensus must necessarily take account of these phases.

On every level of social life calling for concerted action whether it be that of organized groups or the mass, we need a degree of consensus capable of mobilizing the energies of the members or at least of neutralizing their opposition or apathy. Wherever and whenever we seek to enlist the uncoerced cooperation and participation of numbers of diverse men in the pursuit of a common

cause, "We need," as John Dewey has said, "one world of intelligence and understanding, if we are to obtain one world in other forms of human activity."²

IV

There are many ways that society has developed of inducing consent. We may first point to the kind of acquiescence induced by superior force. Power is not equally distributed among the members of most societies and there probably is no society where it is so equally distributed that all the members are equally capable of exerting their will upon the others. In its extreme form, this inequality of power and influence is exemplified by dictatorship. But even in a dictatorship, while the ultimate monopoly of violence rests with the dictator, the members of the society count for something, and the dictator does not enjoy unlimited opportunity to coerce his subjects. Although, for instance, in the case of the present Soviet regime we are convinced of the actuality of its dictatorial character, we recognize nevertheless that there are certain limits beyond which the dictators cannot go, and that if the conditions of life which they can provide for their people and the hopes that they can hold out to them fall below a certain minimum, there will be rebellion and counter-revolution. Similarly, we act, at least with reference to the Voice of America broadcasts to the Soviet people, as if even their public opinion were of some importance.

Though social cohesion in a dictatorship rests ultimately upon force and violence, it need not at all times exercise this force and violence brutally and arbitrarily. It can be held in reserve for occasions when it is absolutely necessary, and indeed the wise dictator knows this principle of prudence in the exercise of his unquestioned power. Suppression may be the first or last stage in the life cycle. It can, for instance, be translated into law, however authoritarian and arbitrary its character, and into a religious

² John Dewey: "Liberating The Social Scientist: A Plea to Unshackle the Study of Man," *Commentary*, IV, No. 4 (October, 1947), 382.

control which may rest upon fear. This attenuated form of the exercise of force has been the practice at least of modern dictators ever since Machiavelli offered his counsel to the dictators of his day. It should be noted, of course, that people may never know that they are exploited and oppressed until they see their own humble status juxtaposed to an actual condition of relative freedom and opportunity that exists in some other society with which they are in contact, or unless they can recall some previous condition of existence in which these forms of oppression did not prevail, or unless, finally, there is held out to them some ideal condition which is possible of achievement and to which they consider themselves entitled. The idea of natural rights is an example of injecting into the minds of men an ideology which serves as an ideal against which they can measure their actual condition, and the experience with this ideology in recent times shows that it has made dictatorship of any kind untenable in the long run. The notion of the inalienable rights of man and of the dignity of the human personality is at work in increasing measure over all the world to challenge autocratic rule in every realm of human life.

Closely related to the type of basis of consensus provided by force and authority is the consensus that rests upon a common identification with great heroes or leaders, of which the charismatic leader depicted by Max Weber is perhaps the fittest example. There are many roads that lead to leadership, although they are not the same roads in all societies. Force and ruthlessness, law and authority, the sacred sanctions of religion or of tradition, or the wisdom or personality of the leader himself, or even the belief in his wisdom or personal qualities, separately or in combination, may establish a man or a group in a position of leadership which can evoke consensus on the part of the followers. Whatever these original sources are, they may be reinforced by propaganda and education and thus come to have a symbolic significance far out of proportion to the original sources.

Just as leaders can serve as instruments for

building consensus, so ideas and ideals and the symbols with which they become identified can create cohesion in the group. The Cross and the Crescent, the Stars and Stripes, and the Hammer and Sickle, the Magna Charta, the Declaration of Independence, and the Four Freedoms, not to speak of the popular stereotypes and the slogans which are the stock-in-trade of so much of our present-day propaganda and public relations, are and will continue to be potential forces for creating and maintaining consensus. The instrumentalities of mass communication lend themselves particularly well to the dissemination of these symbols on a scale hitherto thought impossible. We happen to live in a world in which, despite barriers of technology and of politics, the whole human race becomes potentially exposed to the same symbols. They are weapons of offense and of defense, and they are bonds of union or of discord, depending upon the purposes which those who use them have in mind.

Sociologists have long been accustomed to analyze in particular one of the bases of consensus, namely, the consensus that derives from the social heritage of a people, from a common culture, a common history and set of traditions, from the mores, which can make anything seem right, true, good, beautiful and possible. It is this basis of common social life as patterned by these traditions that makes it possible in the last analysis for any group to think of itself and to act as a society, to regard itself as a "we" group and to counterpose this "we" experience to all that is alien. The extent to which force and authority, law, religious sanction and leadership, propaganda and education, and the apparatus of symbols can be used effectively depends in large part upon this substratum of a common basis of knowledge, belief and standards molded by tradition and reinforced by the ongoing social life which embodies that tradition.

The fact that the instrumentalities of mass communication operate in situations already prepared for them may lead to the mistaken impression that they or the content and symbols which they disseminate do

the trick. It is rather the consensual basis that already exists in society which lends to mass communication its effectiveness. A number of changes have, however, occurred since the days of the primitive local and isolated group life of our ancestors which have profoundly affected the force of tradition. The movements of population and the contact between people from the ends of the earth, the opening of world markets, and the spread of modern technology, the growth of cities, the operation of mass media of communication, the increasing literacy of the masses of people over all the world, have combined to disintegrate local cohesion and to bring hitherto disparate and parochial cultures into contact with each other. Out of this ferment has come the disenchantment of absolute faiths which expresses itself in the secular outlook of modern man.

One characteristic of this secularism is the increasing skepticism toward all dogmas and ideologies. With this goes the reluctance to accept things on faith or on authority, and the substitution of more or less rational grounds for believing, and where reason fails, to seek legitimation for a belief in personal tastes, preferences and the right to choose.

Another feature of this secularism is the change from naïveté to sophistication. One of the prime virtues on which the modern man prides himself is that he will not be taken in by anybody; that he offers sales resistance to those who offer him a pig-in-a-poke; that he suspects the motives of the salesman of goods or of ideas; that he wishes to see the evidence upon which the appeal rests; and that he claims the right to exercise independent judgment on the validity of that evidence. This has in turn led to a perfection of the means of persuasion through the invention of ways of making the irrational appear rational and of subtle means for making people interested in things that may not be to their interest. It has led to an enormous interest in discovering through scientific means what the interests, prejudices and predilections of men are and how they can be manipulated by appropriate appeals.

This secularism carries with it the disintegration of unitary faiths and doctrines, on

the one hand, and their blending into new syncretisms which seek to combine a variety of hitherto incongruous elements in such a way as to attract the greatest number of followers. The symbols and slogans that formerly were characteristic of one party become mingled with those of others in order to woo more effectively the greatest number of adherents. Ideas and ideals that formerly stood for one set of objectives come to be perverted and diluted until they can comprise objectives which formerly seemed incongruous and until it seems that the unambiguous labels under which men formerly united not only no longer differentiate parties but actually can come to have the most contradictory content in order to appeal to all parties.

In addition to force and authority, leadership and personal prestige, ideas, ideals and the symbols into which they are incorporated, and social traditions, we must consider an aspect of the basis of consensus which, though it overlaps with others, is nevertheless so distinctive of our society as to require separate treatment. I refer to public opinion. This, of course, is not an independent force but is an aspect of every ongoing society.

Public opinion is formed in the course of living, acting and making decisions on issues. It is precipitated through the clash of representative ideas reflecting more or less faithfully the positions confronting the respective groups that compose the society. Our society, and others comparable to it, are composed of varieties of constituent groups, occupational and economic, racial and ethnic and religious. Each of these groups articulates its own interests, has its own powers, leadership, creed, political and corporate organization.

Not all members of each group have an equal share of influence nor is the strength of each group determined solely by the size of its membership. These groups are not loose aggregations of men, and it is not necessary for all members of each group to share the official view of the group to which they give their adherence. There will be some who are indifferent or even hostile to what the group stands for without rebelling, as can clearly be seen by looking at our present day

political parties or major economic or religious organizations. The role which the individuals play is not determined alone by their age, sex, race, occupation, economic or educational status, although these may significantly influence the character and policies of the groups to which the individuals belong. What counts, rather, is their power, prestige, strategic position, their resources, their articulateness, the effectiveness of their organization and leadership. Within the group those who make the decisions and who exercise the dominant influence are subjected to pressures from all sides and radiate influence upon their group. The old saying: "I am your leader, therefore I must follow you," suggests the extent to which independent judgment is limited even among the leadership. The decisive part of public opinion, then, is the organization of views on issues that exercise an impact upon those who are in a position to make decisions.

The characteristic feature of public opinion in our society lies both in the fact that so many human beings are affiliated with a variety of organized groups, each of which represents only a segment of their interest, and that another large proportion of our fellowmen are unattached to any stable group and in that sense constitute unorganized masses and thereby leave the decision-making to those who are organized and can exercise their corporate power.

In modern democracies, and to some extent in all inclusive societies on the scale of modern states, men exercise their influence and voice their aspirations through delegated powers operating through functionaries and leaders, through lobbies, party organizations, religious denominations and a variety of other organized groups having a complex internal organization of their own. This seems to be the characteristic way of representative democratic government. In the course of the flow of communication the interests and grievances, the sentiments, attitudes and opinions of the people at the bottom may become grossly distorted, and the people at the top may find themselves so remote from their constituents that they may either be ignorant of their actual feelings or may

seriously misinterpret the fragmentary knowledge that they do have. It is at this point that public opinion studies may prove significant. We have already witnessed in the United States the rise of what might be called government by Western Union, which is instanced by the story of the lady who went to the telegraph office and said, "I should like to send a telegram to my Congressman to use his own judgment."

v

The various bases upon which consensus rests are, of course, not unrelated to the ways in which consensus is reached. Of these only some of the principal channels may be alluded to here: persuasion, discussion, debate, education, negotiation, parliamentary procedure, diplomacy, bargaining, adjudication, contractual relations and compromise are all means for arriving at a sufficient degree of agreement to make the ongoing life of society, despite differences in interests, possible. Ultimately, consent in the face of differences comes down to a contrast between force and fraud on the one hand, and persuasion and rational agreement on the other hand. In some cases, however, the march of events may bring agreement where previously none was possible. If consent does not precede action there is still a chance to obtain consent in the course of action itself. The submission that comes with coercion, it should be noted, however, does not truly give us consensus. It results rather in what the Nazis called *Gleichschaltung*.

As over against the use of violence and fraud to obtain the pseudoconsensus, which even in authoritarian regimes is a precarious basis of power and social solidarity, democracies must resort to the art of compromise which results in agreements more or less rationally arrived at—agreements, the terms of which neither party wants, but at the same time cannot refuse to accept. Whereas authoritarianism gives us a seeming unanimity, which has been described as the unanimity of the graveyard, democracies rest upon the ultimate agreement to disagree, which is the tolerance of a divergent view. Even democracies, when they are in a hurry or when

they are threatened by imminent danger, may sometimes have to resort to the shortcut of coercion, as is typical of the military interludes in democratic history, whereas autocracies may be able to afford at times to allow freedom in considerable areas of living which do not threaten the basis of autocratic power. In general, however, we may say that where consensus exists, coercion is unnecessary and where continuous coercion must be resorted to it is a sign that the regime is either in its initial stages or nearing its end. If might is not right, then might has at any rate to cloak itself in the mantle of rightness to persist, for no authoritarian government can ultimately determine the thinking of people, including what the people think of those who govern them.

The more intelligent and earnest people are the less likely it is that they will agree on all subjects. Coercion can achieve spurious agreement on all issues, but consent can be obtained only provisionally and perhaps only on those issues which do not threaten too deeply the interests, the ideas and ideals of the heterodox. We seem to have worked out quite pragmatically in our democratic society the limits beyond which we are reluctant to push the struggle for agreement. We have agreed that uniformity is undesirable. We have, for instance, through the Bill of Rights, exempted religion from the sphere of necessary agreement, and we have enlarged the area of political freedom up to a "clear and present danger" line.

We have recognized moreover that it is not necessary to obtain agreement on everything in order to operate as an effectively functioning society. There is embodied in our sense of good taste a sensitiveness to our differences, some of which it is not correct to translate into issues for public debate and discussion. We are willing, frequently, to let our silence count as consent on a good many issues which we think are either too trivial or too delicate to push the point. And above all, we have developed patience to endure heresies and sufferance to endure transitory annoyance in the hope that minorities can, under freedom, develop themselves into majorities, and we have come to believe that for

most purposes of life it is more economical, though perhaps less interesting, to count noses than to break heads.

But modern societies, whether they are autocratic or democratic, have learned that in the face of their size and complexity and their internal heterogeneity, the engineering of public consent is one of the great arts to be cultivated. Democracies, as distinguished from autocracies, seem to have taken the longer view by recognizing, as did Machiavelli, that the pseudoconsensus that is achieved by force cannot long endure and weather crisis, when he said: "It cannot be called talent to slay fellow citizens, to deceive friends, to be without faith, without mercy, without religion; such methods may gain empire but not glory." Democracies proceed on the assumption that even if the contending parties fight it out violently there is no assurance that the problem over which they fought won't remain after the stronger has suppressed the weaker. Even military conquest uses the technique of undermining the will to fight of the enemy, and nowadays, even after the enemy has surrendered, we send public opinion pollers among them to learn how best to govern them. The believers in the democratic principle have learned not to be impatient in the process of reaching agreement and that society can go on as long as we agree not to settle our disagreements by resort to force. They have had to learn that society can remain democratic only as long as we recognize and respect that essential residue, the freedom and dignity of every personality, which is no less important than it was before merely because it seems to have become a cliché. They have come to know also, as a contemporary philosopher has put it, that "lacking the consensus a legal crime may be a social virtue and religious heresy a moral duty."

Consensus in mass democracies, therefore, is not so much agreement on all issues, or even on the most essential substantive issues, among all the members of society, as it is the established habit of intercommunication, of discussion, debate, negotiation and compromise, and the toleration of heresies, or even of indifference, up to the point of

"clear and present danger" which threatens the life of the society itself. Rather than resting upon unanimity, it rests upon a sense of group identification and participation in the life of a society, upon the willingness to allow our representatives to speak for us even though they do not always faithfully represent our views, if indeed we have any views at all on many of the issues under discussion, and upon our disposition to fit ourselves into a program that our group has adopted and to acquiesce in group decisions unless the matter is fundamentally incompatible with our interests and integrity.

Consensus is supported and maintained not merely by the ties of interdependence and by a common cultural base, by a set of institutions embodying the settled traditions of the people, and the norms and standards that they imply and impose, not merely by the living together and dealing with one another, but also, and not least important, by the continuing currents of mass communication, which in turn rest for their meaningfulness and effectiveness upon the pre-existence of some sort of a society, which hold that society together and mobilize it for continuous concerted action.

VI

To the traditional ways of communication rumor, gossip and personal contact, to the pulpit, the school and the forum, we have added in our generation the mass media of communication, consisting of the radio, the motion picture and the press. These new media represent giant enterprises, dependent upon and designed to reach a mass audience. By virtue of the fact that they are dependent upon mass patronage, these media transcend both in their content and in their mode of presentation the peculiar interests and preoccupations of the special and segmental organized groups and direct their appeal to the mass. To reach their mass audiences they are constantly tempted to reduce their content, whether it be that of entertainment, enlightenment or appeal to action, to the lowest common denominator, to what is believed will interest the greatest number, if not everybody. Since these mass

media are so often tied to a mass market for their sustenance, they tend furthermore to be as near everything to everybody and hence nothing to anybody as it is possible to be.

Those who manage the mass communication enterprises have, of course, also some incentives to counteract this levelling influence of the mass audience by appeals to the tastes and interests of special groups. The third program of the British Broadcasting Corporation is an experiment in bringing high cultural values to a selected audience and in the effort to enlarge the demand for programs of high quality.

It is upon these mass media, however, that to an ever increasing degree the human race depends to hold it together. Mass communication is rapidly becoming, if it is not already, the main framework of the web of social life. In retrospect we can see how shrewd Hitler and his cohorts were in recognizing that in these instrumentalities they controlled the principal means for moving great masses of men into at least temporary adherence to their objectives and in using them for their own purpose. That they almost succeeded and that the rest of the world had to pay a terrible price in blood and treasure at the last moment to avert their domination over the world might serve as a warning to those who minimize the importance of mass communication and to remind them that we live in an era when the control over these media constitutes perhaps the most important source of power in the social universe. It is interesting to note that modern dictators who espouse the doctrine of the elite and who profess to hold the masses in great contempt, have shown themselves frequently to be more sensitive to the whims of the mass which they profess to despise than have some leaders of democratic societies. They have recognized also that the mass media can be used to manipulate and exploit existing situations and opportunities.

Recent investigations by polling and interview techniques have revealed that despite the dense blanketing of our country with informal educational and propaganda appeals, despite the enormous ramification of organized groups which discuss and disseminate

nate knowledge on issues of current importance, there are vast areas of ignorance on some of the most important issues confronting our society.

The National Opinion Research Center recently found that less than half of the people polled had any reasonably clear meaning of what a tariff was. Other investigations have shown that on even the most central public issues of our time only a small fraction of our people have sufficient understanding to act intelligently. This suggests that the state of public opinion as an aspect of consensus in a society such as ours calls for an unrelenting effort for popular education and for access to reliable sources of information. This does not mean that everybody must be equally well informed on such questions as the tariff, but it does suggest the need for general education to enable the citizen to participate more intelligently and critically in general public discussion as well as to equip him to act with greater knowledge and responsibility in the special interest groups with which he is identified.

If we consider in addition to the vast areas of ignorance, the astonishing degree of apathy and indifference that prevails concerning even the issues of transcendent importance, it becomes clear why mass democracies so often appear incapable of competing effectually with authoritarian societies. Here, again, the price we must pay for the survival of a way of life that we cherish calls for the expenditure of an immensely greater share of our resources than thus far we have been willing to devote to information and education. This calls not merely for continual effort to dispel areas of ignorance, but also areas of indifference which may in part be based upon ignorance. The content of what is to be communicated must therefore be adapted to the audience to which it is addressed, and there must be awareness that we may be speaking over the heads of people or that the symbols that we use may mean entirely different things to others than they do to ourselves. The predominance of the entertainment feature particularly in such media as radio and motion picture does not preclude the appeal to intelligence. It

suggests rather that information and education services to be effective must also be interesting.

Communication, as it is carried on largely through verbal intercourse, can be fortified by a body of common experiences shared by the many, and can be dramatized through art and literature and other means for vivifying ideas and ideals, in order to achieve a sounder basis of common understanding. In the world of science we come about as near to a world society as in any phase of human life, and this world-wide scope of communication which science exemplifies might well serve as a model to be approximated in other realms of human experience, for science, including perhaps even social science and philosophic scholarship, has proved its power to surmount local, national, sectarian and class barriers, and even to infiltrate through the obstacles of official censorship. The same appears to be true of music and art.

There has been much discussion recently, more with reference to the radio and motion picture than the older medium of the press, concerning the concentration of control over these mass media of communication. The fact that the media of communication tend toward monopolistic control, as is evidenced by the building up of industrial empires in this field of enterprise has serious implications for mass democracy. The concentration of such power in a few hands—whether through press associations, newspaper columns syndicates, radio networks or motion picture combines may create great imbalance in the presentation of divergent, especially minority views. It may result in the danger of censorship no less real for being unofficial, and may threaten the free and universal access to the factual knowledge and balanced interpretation which underlie intelligent decision.

In a society dominated by centers of unquestioned power and authority, reinforced by sacred traditions and rituals and capable of eliciting unquestioning loyalty to its norms and purposes, such mass communication devices would not constitute a serious problem. They would reinforce, but would not greatly alter the social structure.

But in a society where all men irrespective of race, creed, origin and status claim and are to be granted an increasing share of participation in the common life and in the making of common decisions, the control of these media of mass communication constitutes a central problem. If it is consensus that makes an aggregate of men into a society, and if consensus is increasingly at the mercy of the functioning of the mass communication agencies as it is in a democratic world, then the control over these instrumentalities becomes one of the principal sources of political, economic and social power. The harnessing of this power is an infinitely more complex and vital problem than any previous challenge that the human race has had to meet.

In mass communication we have unlocked a new social force of as yet incalculable magnitude. In comparison with all previous social means for building or destroying the world this new force looms as a gigantic instrument of infinite possibilities for good or evil. It has the power to build loyalties and to undermine them, and thus by furthering or hindering consensus to affect all other sources of power. By giving people access to alternative views mass communication does of course open the door to the disintegration of all existing social solidarities, while it creates new ones. It is of the first importance, therefore, that we understand its nature, its possibilities and its limits and the means of harnessing it to human purposes.

VII

Before closing, I should like to allude to the problems of consensus as they arise in some of the more crucial spheres of human interaction in contemporary society. The first of these is the sphere of racial and cultural relations, the second is the field of industrial relations, and the third is the area of international relations. I do not mean to suggest that these are the only areas where we face the problems of consensus. I use them merely for illustrative purposes, recognizing that the same problems are also found in family relations, in informal associations, in local community

life, and in the operations of government. These three, however, seem to reflect the most characteristic features of mass communication as it impinges upon consensus in modern mass democracies such as our own.

The spread of industrialism and of capitalism with its world markets and its free workers has given rise among other institutions to giant corporations and giant unions, involving great concentrations of power. The competition and conflicting interests within and between these organizations affects every aspect of social life and determines the level of living and the utilization of the resources of all society. Management and unions, aware of the crucial influence of public opinion upon their relative positions, have not been slow to utilize the instruments of mass communication, both internally and in relation to one another, and in the effort to mold the attitudes and to affect the decisions of society. In so far as these decisions involve national policies, the effort of each side has been directed to rallying support for itself by molding the attitudes and opinions of the larger public.

The relationship between conflicting groups, such as these, illustrates the significance of consensus within the group for the capacity of each to deal with its opponent. From the standpoint of the larger society the need for a more inclusive consensus involving both of these constellations is indispensable for the maintenance of industrial peace. Propaganda appeals directed toward the larger public, the pressure of government and organized bodies in society, such as the churches and the political parties, are among the indispensable elements in the strategy of collective bargaining, arbitration, labor legislation, and the conduct of strikes. The means of mass communication play no less significant a role in the maintenance of mass production and mass markets.

The rise of self-conscious racial and cultural minorities which has proceeded parallel to the spread of the ideal of equality and the institutions of mass democracy through ever larger areas of the world, has accentuated the problems of racial and cultural relations. The contrast between contemporary

society and primitive and earlier historical societies with respect to the contact between diverse racial and cultural groups is startling. Whereas everyone in a primitive, ancient and medieval society had a more or less fixed place in the social structure, depending to a large extent upon the character and position of his ancestor, today all of us are men on the move and on the make, and all of us by transcending the cultural bounds of our narrower society become to some extent marginal men. More and more the relations of life that were formerly settled by sacred tradition and custom become subjects of discussion, debate, negotiation and overt conflict. Many of the problems affecting our national solidarity through our loyalties, rest for their orderly adjustment upon the achievement of consensus across the lines of the diverse races and cultures of which America is comprised. The great obstacles encountered by those who attempted to achieve in the face of prejudice and discrimination a national solidarity sufficient to see our nation through the recent war, should recall to all of us the reality of the existence of minorities in our midst. If the experiment of America shows anything, it shows that, despite the many setbacks which the democratic ideal and practice has suffered, we are determined to achieve consensus and have found the road toward it without too much coercion through the idea of cultural pluralism, which is another expression for the toleration of differences.

Nowhere do the problems of racial and cultural relations present themselves more dramatically than they do in our great cities, where the people of varying stocks and cultures live in dense physical concentration. Whereas, in an earlier society it was unusual to meet a stranger, under the conditions of life in great cities, it is an equal rarity to meet someone who is familiar. Although our face may still light up when, in the crowds of the great cities, we see a friend, we have nevertheless learned to live with people of diverse background and character to a degree sufficient at least to achieve the requirements of a fairly orderly, productive and peaceful society.

What is true of self-conscious minorities impelled by the ideal of the equality of man in our own communities and in our own nation, is increasingly true of the world at large. The so-called backward peoples are increasingly being brought within the orbit of a world society resting upon a world consensus. In this the numerous organized groups and movements, among dominant and minority groups alike, using the instruments of mass communication to bring their ideas before a world public, are increasingly evident.

And finally the question must have occurred to people who are not versed in the language of sociologists and in the serious subjects with which they are preoccupied, why it is that sociologists who claim as their vocation the study of social interaction have paid so little attention to interaction on the grandest scale of all, namely, the interaction between national states and what we call international relations, for in this sphere is exemplified the operation of consensus upon which the future of mankind depends.

We have been making some progress in the building of world consensus. We do have a fairly general recognition of economic interdependence on a world scale. We have a great deal more of traffic across the bounds of nations and of continents than the world has ever seen before. We have even some incipient international institutions whose strength is being tested by the increasing tensions brought about by the very fact that we live in an emerging single world in which we have contacts and conflicts of interest and of ideas with people of whom we were formerly oblivious. We even can see some semblance of emerging world loyalties which makes the expression "world citizenship" sound less utopian than it did before. The instruments of mass communication, particularly the radio, and, it seems soon, television, combining the faithful transmission of the voice with that of the visual image of the human face and gesture, are particularly well suited to supply the means for the furtherance of understanding across the borders of sovereign states.

As long as we do not have a monopoly of power to coerce all of the other nations and

people of the earth into our way of life, the only road we can travel is that of continued negotiation, persuasion and compromise. We should probably, even if we had the power of coercion, not be able to use it on others without destroying the very values, which might tempt us to use it.

If our ways of thought and conception of freedom and democracy, our system of economy and our political and social ideals seem to be, as I am sure they seem to many, irreconcilable with those of the only other remaining power constellation in the world, it is well to recall that there was a time when Catholics and Protestants felt very passionately that they could not live in peace in the same state. Time has fortunately proved them wrong. There have been other conflicts in the history of man which seemed at the time equally irresolvable. The uncomfortable but at the same time reassuring fact, however, is that today in this shrunken world there are more effective ways of interfering with the internal life of any society by those without through the instrumentalities of mass communication, which are no respecters of boundaries and which find ways of surmounting all barriers. What is more, these products of mass communication have a way of reaching the great inert masses of the world, for making them restless and mobilizing them for action, or at least for making the dominant groups in their respective societies more responsive to their pressure.

Mass communication will not, of course, by itself produce the minimum of world consensus requisite for world peace and world society. But it does not operate by itself. It operates through and in conjunction with existing and emerging institutions in a climate of opinion and ultimately through and upon human beings. There are other things in the world besides mass communication, but these other things, some of which I have indicated, are tied increasingly to mass communication and through this tie give it its strategic significance.

The media of mass communication, like all the technological instruments that man has invented, are themselves neutral. They can be used to instil a fighting faith or the

will to reconciliation. At any rate, the relationship between nations and people that will allow the fullest use of the world's resources to meet human needs under freedom and order and in peace, calls today for nothing less than the building of a world consensus, for a social psychological integration of the human race commensurate with the interdependent far-flung and rich material resources and human energies of the world.

In mobilizing the instrumentalities of mass communication for the building of that consensus, we cannot fail to remind ourselves that along with the perfection of these means of human intercourse science has also perfected unprecedented means of mass destruction. But in the case of neither the instruments of mass communication nor of atomic energy do the inventors of the instrument dictate the uses to which they shall be put. As a contemporary historian has recently put it: "If our characteristic Western gift [by which he refers to technology] proves to have been a blessing for mankind, it will be a great blessing; and, if a curse, a great curse. If things go well, the epitaph of history on the Franks [by which he means us] may run: 'Here lie the technicians, who united mankind'; and if things go badly: 'Here lie the technicians, who exterminated the human race.'"³ Except that in the latter case, Professor Toynbee, the author of these remarks, fails to point out that there may not be anybody left to carve that epitaph.

If we are uneasy today it is not because of these products of science but because of what men may do with these products of human ingenuity. There is a frightful peril in delay, and the realization of this peril is rapidly leading to intellectual paralysis instead of greater intellectual exertion. The atomic bomb will not, we are told, yield to a physical defense or a counter-weapon which will neutralize its destructive potential. The only defense we have is social—the creation of world consensus. Since the mass media of communication are capable of providing the

³ Arnold Toynbee: "Technology: Distinguishing Mark of the West," *Listener* November 20, 1947, p. 895.

picture of social reality and the symbolic framework of thought and fantasy and the incentives for human action on an enormous scale, the knowledge of their effective use should become the most important quest of social science, and particularly of sociology. The circumstances under which we live do not any longer allow the saints to sit in their ivory tower while burly sinners rule the world.

I hereby extend a cordial invitation to my fellow sociologists, and such other social scientists, including the statisticians, who

care to join us, to return to the subject matter for the cultivation of which society sustains us, though let it be admitted, on a none too luxurious level. That subject matter is the life of man in society and the heart of that subject matter today is the understanding of the processes through which consensus on a world scale is created. Unless we solve that problem, and solve it in a reasonably satisfactory way soon, there will be no opportunity to work on any of the others on which our minds or our hearts are set.

INFORMAL ORGANIZATION AND THE THEORY OF SCHISM*

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ONE OF the most fruitful concepts to emerge out of recent social science research is that of informal organization. Studies in such diverse fields as industrial relations, community organization, bureaucratic structure, primitive law, military organization, and prison administration have established the reality of informal groupings, often *sub rosa* in character, within formal social structures.¹ They have further

indicated that these groupings, however obstructive they may be to formal organizational ends, nonetheless have a positive functional significance for their participants and for the larger sociocultural system. Equally clear has been the spontaneity with which such groupings develop, quite irrespective of executive orders and directives that issue along line communications of the formal structure.

There yet remains, however, the problem of incorporating these empirical insights into a more generalized conceptual framework. Only then can the essential equivalence between informal organization and certain other schismatic social processes be shown. Otherwise the term will remain a residual category having no logically determinate relationship with other concepts.

The present paper is an attempt to formulate, in terms of a simple technique of graphic analysis, the outlines of such a conceptual framework. The scheme thus advanced has enough generality to embrace informal organization, clique formation, factionalism, secession, heresy, class conflict, and other such divisive processes. By means

* Manuscript received November 4, 1947.

¹ Indicative of the wide range of problems out of which this concept has evolved are the following sample titles, all in one way or another concerned with the nature and significance of informal organization: F. J. Roethlisberger and William J. Dickson, *Management and the Worker* (Cambridge, 1939), chs. 21-23; W. Lloyd Warner and Paul S. Lunt, *The Social Life of a Modern Community*, Yankee City Series, I (New Haven, 1941), pp. 110-112, 350-354; Thurman W. Arnold, *The Folklore of Capitalism* (New Haven, 1937), pp. 358-372; Bronislaw Malinowski, *Crime and Custom in Savage Society* (London, 1926), pp. 100-111; William Foote Whyte, *Street Corner Society* (Chicago, 1943), chs. 4, 6; Alexander H. Leighton, *The Governing of Men* (Princeton, 1945), chs. 7, 8, pp. 350-354; Chester I. Bernard, *The Functions of the Executive* (Cambridge, 1938), ch. 9 and *passim*; J. L. Moreno, *Who Shall Survive?* (Washington, 1934), chs. 7-9, 23; Norman S. Hayner and Ellis Ash, "The Prisoner Community as a Social Group," *American Sociological Review*, 4:

362-369 (1939); Anonymous, "Informal Social Organization in the Army," *American Journal of Sociology*, 51: 365-370 (1946).