Is Complex Society More Rational than Simple Society?

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This paper poses the question whether a complex society is more rational than a simple society.¹ A complex society is defined as a contemporary industrial society like Britain, France, Japan, the United States, and West Germany, while a simple society is a society which is small in scale with regard to numbers, territory, and range of social contacts, and which has by comparison with more advanced societies a simple technology and economy and little specialization of social function.² This paper looks first at the evolutionary perspective that some political scientists and anthropologist hold concerning this question. It then looks at two case studies of informal groups in complex societies. Its principal conclusion is that a complex society is no more rational than a simple society.

The Problem: Evolutionary Perspective

The political scientists Almond and Powell see social change moving in one direction from a non-rational society to a rational society. They write:

Secularization is the process whereby men become increasingly rational, analytical, and empirical in their political action. We may illustrate this concept by comparing a political leader in a
modern democracy with a political leader in a traditional or primitive African political system. A modern democratic political leader when running for office, for instance, will gather substantial amounts of information about the constituency which he hopes will elect him and the issues of public policy with which that constituency may be concerned. He has to make estimates of the distribution and intensity of demands of one kind or another; he needs to use creative imagination in order to identify a possible combination of demands which may lead to his receiving a majority of the votes in his constituency. A village chief in a tribal society operates largely with a given set of goals and a given set of means of attaining those goals which have grown up and been hallowed by custom. The secularization of culture is the processes whereby traditional orientations and attitudes give way to more dynamic decision-making processes involving the gathering of information, the evaluation of information, the laying out of alternative courses of action, the selection of a course of action from among these possible courses, and the means whereby one tests whether or not a given course of action is producing the consequences which were intended.3

The anthropologist Service also holds the view that social evolution is directional. He says:

All anthropologists would agree that the earliest human societies must have been small and simple in social organization, poor in technological equipment, without formal legal or governmental institutions, and with an ideology based more on the supernatural than on science. Since these characteristics contrast greatly with modern industrial states, we think of evolution as directional: generally from small to large societies, from simple to complex
organizations, from informal to formal political institutions, and so on. The idea of directionality is important because it provides the criteria for classifying separate societies into general stages of the evolution of culture as a totality.\textsuperscript{4}

Service divides the evolution of culture into two different categories: specific and general. Specific evolution refers to his concern with adaptive variation and "general evolution refers to the progressive emergence of superior forms, stage by stage, which can be related to the directional evolution of the total culture of the human species."\textsuperscript{5} A complex society, then, according to Service, is superior to, and by implication, more rational than, a simple society.

Increasingly less sociologists have bothered to study symbolic formations and action because they are essentially dramatic and are thus not given to direct and precise measurement. The phenomena that are not studied come to be regarded as sociologically insignificant. This further perpetuates the view that modern society is predominantly secular, manipulative, and rational as exemplified by Almond-Powell and Service. But can either of these views be justified by anthropological evidence? Can all anthropologists agree with either of these outlooks as Service argues?

**Case Studies**

In what follows, a brief account is given of two case studies of informally organised interest groups within modern political contexts in complex societies: a group of élite businessmen in Britain and a religious group in the United States. In both cases, there are structural circumstances that prevent the group from organising itself
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as a formal association. Furthermore, in each group, one or another of the patterns of symbolic formation is exploited to solve organisational problems. Both groups discussed can be described as culture groups in the sense that each has a special style of life that distinguishes it from the rest of the society. Though they differ in their cultural forms they are structurally the same, being interest groups co-ordinating their corporate action in terms of an informal organisation.

1. Élite Group: City Men

I am choosing the economic élite, who dominate the City of London, the nerve centre of the financial system of Britain. Since the Report of the Bank Rate Tribunal in 1958, some accounts of various features of the organisation of business in London have emerged. From these accounts it is evident that millions of pounds worth of business is carried on daily in London without using written documents, being mainly conducted in face-to-face conversations or through the telephone. This is said to be a technical necessity if business is to flow smoothly. As the risks involved are formidable, however, this type of business transaction is confined to a limited number of people who trust one another. Such a high degree of trust can arise only among those who know one another, who respect the same norms and who are involved in a network of primary relationships that are governed by the same values and the same patterns of symbolic behaviour.

"For these reasons," says Cohen, "City men are recruited from some exclusive status groups. They are mostly products of the English public school system. The schools in this system achieve two major tasks: first, they socialise, or rather train, their pupils in specific patterns of symbolic behaviour, including accent, manner of speech,
etiquette, style of joking, play. Second, they create a web of enduring friendship and comradeship among the pupils and these relationships are often continued after graduation through periodic old-boy unions, affiliation within the same clubs, and further interaction in other social situations.”

The available reports reveal that the speed and efficiency with which London conducts its business are made possible mainly by this network of primary, informal relationships which connect the business élite. This network is governed by archaic norms, values, and codes. It is held together by a complex body of customs that are to an outsider as esoteric and bizarre as those in any preindustrial culture. Ferris gives a dramatic description of the odd and highly stylised manner in which the bill brokers known in London as the “Top-hatters” make their daily rounds in the city.

Top-hatters seem to enjoy visiting in an archaic manner. They can be seen queueing at a bank, four or five in a row on a hard bench, striped trousers tugged up to show uniformly dark socks, polished pointed shoes neatly side by side on the cold tiled floor. Time passes. A Time is exchanged for a Telegraph. There is an absence of documents, a bland assurance that events are being coped with—as indeed they are. . .

The top-hatters are coping; but the morning is drifting by. When his turn comes the bill broker steps into the office of whatever official the bank employs to deal with the market, says ‘Good morning,’ pulls up a chair, and begins to talk about cricket or last night’s television. This is hearsay: it would be unthinkable to let an outsider accompany a bill broker on his rounds, and the broker’s account may unconsciously over-emphasize what he
likes to think will be described as the 'typically English' part of the business. But all the versions agree: sport, weather, a little politics are usually touched upon, and there may be some innocuous banter, before either reaches the naked word 'money.'

"This business of How-do-you-do?" Ferris was told, "does it mean anything? Of course it does. You are saying in effect: 'We accept the normal rules of society, and we can now start exchanging ideas.' . . . Then there's top hats. If you go to a bank with a top hat they say 'Oh, it's one of the brokers,' and you walk right in. If you went in in a homburg there'd be an awful business of 'Good gracious me, Mr—, where's your hat this morning?' There'd be a thing, which of course you want to avoid at all costs."

The following episode indicates strongly how archaic and esoteric the patterns of symbolic behaviour of the bill brokers are. A bill broker was once introduced to the producer of What's My Line?, a television quiz program, as a possible candidate. The broker was willing to appear, but the producer turned him down. "'Viewers wouldn't understand what you did,' he said, 'And if they did, they wouldn't believe it.'"

City men may share the same basic culture of the society in which they live. They achieve distinction, however, in terms of their special style of life such as accent, dress, manners, patterns of friendship, exclusive gatherings, élite endogamy, and ideology. Through the informal channels of communication they identify their problems, deliberate over them, and make decisions. Compliance with these decisions is ensured by the various types of constraints that are built into their style of life. They validate their élite position in terms of an ideology,
which is designed to convince the ordinary members of the society, as well as themselves, of the legitimacy of their status. The ceremonials that pervade their lives in all sorts of situations keep alive this ideology and provide its symbols with meanings. Thus, as Cohen says, "although they ostensibly appear as separate and distinct individuals in different fields of life without obvious corporate organisation, the élite achieve organisational co-ordination informally through the symbolic blue-print of the style of life which they share with one another."  

2. Religious Group: The Nation of Islam

Next I shall discuss the process of religious development as an articulating institution by examining the Nation of Islam in the United States. Essien-Udom describes how desperate is the social situation of the lower-class Negroes in the large northern cities. He says, "The lower-class Negroes in the large northern cities are estranged from the larger society which they seek to enter, but which rejects them. Similarly, they are estranged from their own group which they despise. The result of this feeling of dual alienation is apathy, futility, and emptiness of purpose." This sense of social estrangement and alienation is not limited to the Negroes. It is a problem common to urban dwellers. The importance for a meaningful life is the same for Negroes as well as for others. The point, however, is that the impact of contemporary urban tensions and anxieties on an already marginal group is paralysing. Essien-Udom states that the impact "corrupts the personality of its victims, depriving them of any sense of human worth and dignity." The sense of estrangement and alienation of the lower-class Negroes has always been present, but has lacked positive articulation. The Nation of Islam is an attempt to
provide for an articulation for this feeling by building a "Nation" in which one could be black and unashamed.

Black Muslims seek to insulate their members from any interaction with whites and middle to upper-class Negroes, who take the assimilationist stand. At the same time they put pressure on their members to intensify interaction among themselves in order to deepen the distinctiveness of an emerging "Nation." "The Nation of Islam is important," writes Essien-Udom, "not because it tells whites how bitterly Negroes feel about their present conditions but for showing the Negro masses 'why' they feel the way they do, 'how' they may get out of their degradation, and 'how' they may become self-respecting citizens."15

Thus, the Nation of Islam as a religious movement has provided a blue-print for the articulation of an informal organisation for lower-class Negroes. It mobilises powerful emotions that are associated with the basic dilemma of the Negro masses. It makes it possible to finance places of worship along with welfare services, education, and social activities. It also provides frequent meetings, where in the course of ritual activities, a great deal of informal interaction takes place. The system of myths and symbols which the religious doctrines of the Nation of Islam provide is given to interpretation and serves as a flexible ideology for the Negroes.

How Rational Is Complex Society?

I have briefly described two case studies of informal groups found in complex societies in order to indicate that strange behaviour is not the exclusive monopoly of a "primitive" society. The archaic behaviour of City men and the distinctive patterns of action of
the Black Muslims are not unlike the symbolic patterns of behaviour of tribes of the simplest societies. Peculiar patterns of behaviour are firmly built into the fabric of our social life. To mention further examples, the rituals and ceremonials regularly performed by millions of rational men who are affiliated within Freemasonry on both sides of the Atlantic are as odd and eccentric as the rituals and ceremonials of peoples of the simplest societies. In the exclusive group of wealthy Anglo-Jewish families whose men became related to one another as cousins as described by Bermant, the obligation to help was maintained in terms of Judaic values and practices just as it was by the mystical terms and rituals connected with the dead among the Creoles. "The colossal drama," writes Cohen in this connection, "staged annually in Red Square in Moscow on May Day, at staggering costs in manpower and resources, is indeed far more exotic than the annual Earth Cult gathering of the Tallensi or the coronation of the king of the Shilluks." Indeed, there is no evidence whatever that in spite of the advance of science apparently meaningless ritual activities have become outdated.

In many complex societies formally organised religion has been losing importance. Wilson writes that average Sunday attendance in church is less than three per cent in Norway and between ten and fifteen per cent in England. He points out, however, that the demand on religion for rites of passage continues with little change. The three most crucial rites of passage, birth, marriage, and death, are still administered by established religion.

There are two kinds of problems in life: one is solved by science and the other is not. The former includes such problems as those concerned with disease, space exploration, biological inheritance,
fertility of the soil, and so on. In a simple society these problems are explained in mystical terms, while in a complex society they are solved by science. But there are many other problems in life which science has never solved rationally. The following statement of Cohen supports my belief that the central problem of human existence in a complex society is not different from that in a simple society. “Talk to a ‘primitive’ man about interplanetary travel or about chemical processes, and you will immediately see that he is many centuries behind you in his knowledge. But talk with him about the meaning of life and death, fortune and misfortune, the nature of political authority, the various crises in the life of the individual, and you will immediately discover that you are in fact talking to a contemporary. These problems have had no final solutions, and they continue to challenge our thinking and feeling.” 20 These problems are not trivial but are more fundamental than many of the problems posed and resolved by science. Man in a complex society as well as man in a simple society needs a solution to these problems. He seeks explanations for these perennial questions. As Cohen writes, “We are no less preoccupied with this problem than the ‘primitive’ Azande and our explanations are no more rational.” 21

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to re-examine the evolutionary perspective adopted by Almond-Powell and Service in the light of recent developments in the study of both simple and complex societies. This perspective assumes the secularisation of society by which Almond-Powell mean “the process whereby men become increasingly rational,
analytical, and empirical in their political action.”

The recent studies of informal organisations, including two case studies that I have cited in this paper, reveal that men in a complex society are not much more rational in their thinking than men in a simple society and that modern man is as much preoccupied with the perennial human problems as man in a simple society. I do not underestimate the contribution that science has made towards the development of modern industrial societies. There is no doubt that the advance of science has solved a number of human problems. This does not mean, however, that science has solved all the problems in life. Indeed, some human problems such as life and death, fortune and misfortune, various crises in life, and so on, which are more fundamental than those that have already been resolved by science, remain as unsolved in a complex society as in a simple society. The failure of Almond-Powell to distinguish between these two kinds of human problems has resulted in their straightforward association of the secularisation of society with the development of science.

The term “superior forms,” on the other hand, used by Service for the definition of a complex society in connection with general evolution, does not specify in what way a complex society is superior to a simple society. Furthermore, it clearly involves the value judgement that a complex society is better than a simple society.

It is impossible for man to maintain his selfhood and poise in a completely unknown world. In place of the unknowable he has substituted belief in a symbolically constructed universe in which he can feel reasonably at home. It would be wrong to go to the other extreme by stating that this symbolic construction in a preindustrial
society is more rational than in an industrial society. This paper has been an attempt, however, to indicate that human symbolic formulations in a complex society are no more rational than in a simple society.

Notes


5 Ibid., 226.


9 Ibid., p. 66.

10 Ibid., p. 76.


13 Ibid., p. 265.

14 Ibid., p. 266.

15 Ibid., p. 273.


18 Ibid., pp. 134-35.

