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Structural versus Piecemeal Definitions of Social Issues: A Subjective Factor in System-Transcending Struggle

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Virtually all social scientists, Marxists or non-Marxists, agree that various aspects of advanced contemporary societies have become increasingly interdependent. Therefore it would seem that piecemeal definitions of issues and social problems are becoming more and more inadequate in dealing with the crucial systemic characteristics of our societies. Decision-makers as well as the public need not only more information, but *systemic* information based on *structural* rather than *piecemeal* definitions of issues and social problems. This paper explores, firstly, how mainstream sociology and Marxism deal with the complexity and interdependency characteristics of mature capitalist societies. Secondly, it explores some normative conclusions about the type of political information and communication needed in mature capitalist societies, according to Marxist and mainstream sociological interpretations. Thirdly, it provides some empirical illustrations of how we can study piecemeal versus structural definitions of issues and problems in political communications and public opinion. Finally, some assertions about holistic versus piecemeal political communication and policy-making are briefly confronted with Popper's views about the compatibility of piecemeal versus utopian or holistic social engineering with political democracy.

Virtually all social scientists, Marxists or non-Marxists, agree that the various elements which make up advanced contemporary societies have become increasingly interdependent. This may also imply an increasing vulnerability of these societies; if one significant element of such a society is struck by crisis or destruction, this may shatter the society as a whole, if not necessarily the system as such. A corallary of this systemic characteristic of advanced contemporary societies is that piecemeal or sectorial policies decided and implemented without due regard for the system as a whole may turn out to be counter-productive. In a society which is much

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Virtually all social scientists, Marxists or non-Marxists, agree that the various elements which make up advanced contemporary societies have become increasingly interdependent. This may also imply an increasing vulnerability of these societies; if one significant element of such a society is struck by crisis or destruction, this may shatter the society as a whole, if not necessarily the system as such. A corallary of this systemic characteristic of advanced contemporary societies is that piecemeal or sectorial policies decided and implemented without due regard for the system as a whole may turn out to be counter-productive. In a society which is much

less complex and which exhibits much less interdependency between its constituent elements, piecemeal or sectorial dysfunctions do not as a rule have such repercussions for the society as a whole. Furthermore, they are often recognized and dealt with in due time, whereas in a society characterized by greater interdependency, 'due time' may not prevent them from reverberating through the whole system. Whether such systemic effects are highly dramatic and therefore more or less instantaneously visible, or of a more 'creeping' nature, they may not be discovered in time – in the case of a dramatic event because of the irreversibility or magnitude of sudden damage, and in the case of 'creeping' effects because such effects may imply changes in sectors far removed from and unsurveyed by the policy-makers responsible for the original decision.

Thus, the systemic characteristics of advanced contemporary societies confront the decision-maker in government and business as well as the ordinary citizen with a dilemma: in order to make wise decisions he must have access not only to *more* information than in simpler societies but to *systemic* information. At the same time such information is made difficult to assemble due both to the complexity of the system, and to the piecemeal or personalizing nature of the information conveyed by most media of political communication. This contradiction between the kind of information needed in advanced contemporary societies, and their seeming inability to provide such information, is the starting-point for the enquiries to be made in this paper. The following questions will be discussed:

1. How do social scientists conceptualize and empirically analyse the increasing complexity and interdependency of our societies?
2. How are models of societal complexity related to political communication?
3. What concepts and empirical methods can be designed to assess the extent to which political communications and opinions take account of the systemic characteristics of contemporary societies, or fail to do so? If they fail, what is the dominant style of political communication?
4. To what extent are different styles of political communication and policy-making incompatible or compatible with different politico-economic systems?

1. Marxian Concepts of the Complexity and Interdependency of Mature Capitalist Societies

Our notions concerning societal complexity and interdependency derive from two theoretical traditions, mainstream sociology[1] and Marxism. In

both traditions the increasing division and specialization of labour is seen as a main factor in creating an increasing interdependency between the constituent elements of a given society. In the structural-functionalist part of the mainstream tradition, this approach is expanded to comprehend also an increasing structural or institutional differentiation of social functions. Organic solidarity as defined by Durkheim, and the creation of a consensus not around demands for uniform behaviour but around restitutive or equilibrating mechanisms which regulate relations of exchange between diverse roles and interests, take care of the functional integration required for system stability and reproduction. Class conflict, even if not completely neglected by structural functionalists, is seen only as one of several factors disturbing societal stability. Such conflicts are also considered as a focus of equilibrating and restitutive rules of exchange which eventually result in an institutionalization of conflict.

In Marxism class struggle is seen as a much more fundamental process resolved not by institutionalization of the conflict but eventually by a structural transformation of society which implies that labour takes control over the means of production hitherto controlled by the capitalist class. Whether or not one accepts this as a prediction or as a political aim, the fact remains that Marxism conceptualizes the resolution of class conflict in theoretical terms quite different from those dominant in the structural-functional tradition.

But even if Marxists view class struggle as the main vehicle of system change, it would be quite misleading to characterize Marxism simply as a conflict theory. The issues of class struggle are not generated mainly within the process of class struggle itself. According to Marxist theory the stage is set for class struggle, and the issues of that struggle are defined by two other processes which until recently have tended to be neglected or glossed over in standard textbooks of sociology and political science in the West. These processes are (1) the exploitation and subordination of labour by capital, and (2) the increasing contradictions between forces and relations of production in mature capitalism.[2] The second process has some elements in common with structural-functionalist notions of increasing division of labour, structural differentiation and growing interdependency.

In more common language, what Marxists call the productive forces include the raw materials from nature, technology, labour power and work organization – that is the whole labour process. The increasing division of labour within this labour process, the structural differentiation of productive and consumption units, the creation of joint-stock companies, of

growing business empires, and of expanding markets is seen by Marxists as evidence of the *increasingly societal character of productive forces*. Such an increasing interdependency within and between growing productive units and their consumer markets is recognized, however, by non-Marxists as well as Marxists. The main difference between Marxists and non-Marxists on this point is that Marxists draw attention to the structural 'contradiction' emerging between two structures: the increasingly *societal character* of *productive forces* on the one hand, and on the other hand the *private character* of the so-called *relations of production*. While the societal character of productive forces in mature capitalism involves most of society, and may have consequences, good or bad, for society as a whole, the private character of the relations of production implies that the institutional patterns and decisions of capital and management are concerned only with the capital accumulation and profitability of single firms, not with broad-ranging societal effects of capitalist production. In a society with a high degree of internal dependency between its constituent elements, what is economically rational for the single firm is not necessarily rational from the point of view of the aggregate interests of society as a whole – particularly not in periods of economic crises. Even non-Marxist progressive liberals today acknowledge that the 'invisible hand' which according to Adam Smith would harmonize private and societal interests, functions quite badly in contemporary industrial societies, if it ever operated the way Adam Smith presumed.

But whereas contemporary progressive liberals have called for state intervention to take care of broader societal interests to supplement capitalist decision-making geared only to the satisfaction of private interests, a Marxist analysis calls for more far-reaching changes. The state intervention of progressive liberal welfare capitalism is seen by Marxists not only as an insufficient response to the increasingly societal character of productive forces; such state intervention in so-called mixed economies is viewed as breaking fundamental capitalist 'rules of the game', and destroying the logic of market forces, without replacing them with anything other than a slow and inadequate state bureaucracy.[3] The interventionist 'capitalist state' emerging in response to the increasing societal character of productive forces at best can ameliorate some limited environmental and social effects of capitalist production – at enormous costs. It cannot prevent or resolve the underlying contradictions. This can be done only by changing the private character of capitalist relations of production, namely by allowing the working class with its wider and more socially relevant spectrum of interests to take control over production. In mature

capitalism the private character of existing relations of production are simply not compatible with the highly societal character of productive forces. Forces and relations of production can be made compatible only through a socialist transformation of society, according to Marxist analyses.

In the study of political communications and opinions in capitalist societies, it would thus seem important, from a Marxist point of view, to ask whether such communications and opinions take account of the wide-ranging societal effects and costs of the capitalist mode of production, and the limited focus of capitalist decision-makers. Unless political communications and opinions take account of these structural contradictions, they are not compatible with the issue-generating structures of mature capitalism; systemic information is not provided.

But the incompatibility between forces and relations of production in mature capitalism is only one way of conceptualizing the contradictions of capitalism in Marxist analysis. The exploitation and subordination of labour under capital is another fundamental aspect of capitalist relations of production. In this context I will not dwell at greater length on this aspect of capitalism since my main concern here is to illuminate what types of political communication flow from the two models of society which we have briefly summarized: mainstream sociology and Marxist models. But a few points should still be made about the issue of exploitation.

The exploitation and subordination of labour are seen by Marxists as part of the main value-creating process under capitalism. Marxist conceptions on this point are much more controversial than Marxist conceptions of the growing contradiction between forces and relations of production.[4] A full-fledged Marxist analysis of all the contradictions of mature capitalism cannot leave aside these controversial points. But our task here is more limited due to our focus on the structural generation of issues in political communication.

However, there is one aspect of the exploitative production of value under capitalism which is relevant for our discussion of political communication, and which I cannot disregard in spite of the fact that no space can be allocated to discussing the highly controversial notions underlying the Marxist concept of exploitation.[4]

Non-Marxist conceptions of the relations between capital and labour view this relationship as an *exchange* between the owner of an industry and the labourers who sell their labour to him. In exchange for their labour, workers are remunerated with wages. A common assumption underlying the notion of exchange is that the values of items or services

exchanged are equal, and take place between actors who are free to accept or reject the deal. You are paid what your labour is worth. If not, the worker is free to reject the job. This assumption of a close correspondence between wages and the value of labour is reinforced by the fact that, in piece-rate work, you are paid more the more you produce.

Higher skill levels similarly attract higher payment. The worker is thus led to believe that he is paid for his total labour, when in fact his labour power is bought at its exchange value on the labour market while the capitalist reaps the benefit of its full use value. Without this extra benefit – that is the surplus value of production – no capital accumulation would be possible.

But the realities of unequal exchange between capital and labour are disfigured and masked not only by the mystifyingly objective appearance of money-wages as measured against the equally objective amount and skills of labour. Other 'forms of mystification' are introduced by the impersonal forces of market mechanisms, and by the separation of capital and capital investments from the history of labour which created this capital in the first place.[5]

Invested capital is commonly seen as an independent factor which contributes to increased productivity. This view of capital as an independent factor separated from the history of labour, and from the extraction of surplus value which created capital in the first place, implies a narrowing of the field of vision which conceals the role of labour, and allows capital to picture itself as the prime mover of the economy, and the main creator of value. The lack of transparency implied by looking at capital as a 'thing', an independent 'factor of production', rather than as a social relationship involving the exploitation of labour, poses another problem for the content of political communications. Issues are buried here which rarely, if ever, are raised in established political communications in capitalist societies. Claus Offe (1972) speaks of the repressive exclusion of certain items from the political agenda; anti-capitalist demands and interests simply cannot be effectively articulated on the political arenas of our capitalist societies. Such demands are lacking necessary and respectable means of articulation.[6] If such demands surface anyway, they are immediately stamped as threatening individual freedom and social order.

2. Models of Society and Political Communication

If the Marxist diagnosis of mature capitalism is accepted as scientifically more comprehensive, logical, and true to the facts than the models of

mainstream sociology, then the style and content of political communication most adequate for the resolution of problems in that kind of society, would have to include the following features:

1. A full representation of the systemic contradictions of mature capitalism, with its high degree of economic interdependency, combined with a relative neglect of the social effects of that interdependency due to the private character of business decisions, and combined finally with costly state intervention to tackle those social effects – interventions which, however, often disrupt the functioning of the economy and thus undermine the fiscal basis for continued state interventions.

2. A full representation of the exploitation and class inequality inherent in the capitalist order.

3. A critique of the 'bourgeois hegemony' or repressive selection which prevents an effective articulation of 1) and 2); and on the positive side, a building of alternative channels of political communication to mobilize the working class for system-transcending class struggle, rather than only for a limited wage struggle within the framework of existing capitalist relations of production.

If the models of mainstream sociology are considered more scientifically comprehensive, logical, and true to the facts than the diagnosis stemming from Marxist theory, then the content and style of political communication most adequate for the resolution of problems in that kind of society would have to include the following features:

1. A full representation of interdependency, which is an attribute of mature capitalist societies, combined with an emphasis on organic solidarity and collaboration even between social classes which is required in such societies, and combined finally with a piecemeal attention both to negative social effects and symptoms of crises, and to the needs of amelioration and restitution emerging in such specific instances.

2. Explanations of crises and negative social effects *either* in terms of law-like and impersonal chains of events – market forces, for instance – which must be accepted as facts of life, *or* in terms of poor decision-making, or in terms of the personal wickedness or the defiant character of actors, individual or collective, held responsible for such crises and

negative effects. Personal criticism and attribution of guilt are more useful against actors who are located in the opposite ideological camp, while 'naturalistic' law-like explanations are more useful with regard to negative consequences of action in one's own camp. Thus a trade-union official who applies the mainstream sociological images of society will find it most useful to pick leading capitalists as targets of personal attack, while explaining possible negative consequences of union activities in a 'naturalistic' manner; capitalists and managers will find it most useful to do the opposite.

3. Appeals for maintaining consensus around the organic solidarity of mature capitalist societies and for conforming to restitutive rules of exchange combined with demands that accepted rules of deviance control be applied on those who forcefully attack this consensus. Such accepted rules of deviance control may range from repressive tolerance to selective exclusion from access to established media of political communication.

These two sets of specifications of the content and style of political communication relating most closely to Marxist and mainstream sociological models of capitalist societies, respectively, are ventured here not as empirical hypotheses. They should rather be considered as normative conclusions about the most adequate types of political communication, given an assumption of rationality and two alternative assumptions about the relative merits of Marxism and mainstream sociology. The relative scientific merits of these two approaches cannot be discussed in this context for space reasons; but I do find mainstream sociology less convincing scientifically due to its exclusion of significant facts and structural aspects of advanced industrial societies. My most important conclusion on this point is that mainstream sociology cannot serve as a basis for political communication strategies emphasizing structural definitions of issues. From the mainstream approach there flow personalizing and piecemeal definitions of issues, and ideological appeals in consensus terms plus a limited and opportunistic application of causal analyses with regard to chains of events, without any specification of the structural context and meaning of such events.

However, the two sets of normative conclusions indicated above can be converted into empirical hypotheses about the relationship between styles and contents of political communication and accepted models of society, if we assume that communicators are rational actors, and that they are

guided by either of the two suggested models of society. The derivation of such empirical hypotheses does not require that we know which of the two models is the more scientifically valid.

So far I have tried to answer the question how social scientists conceptualize and empirically analyze the increasing complexity and interdependency of mature capitalist societies, and to this I have added some normative conclusions and empirical hypotheses about the relationships between alternative ways of conceptualizing mature capitalism and different styles and contents of political communication. In the next section I will address the question of what concepts and empirical methods can be designed to assess the extent to which political communications and opinions take account of systemic characteristics of mature capitalism, or rather concentrate on piecemeal issues, personalistic characterizations and evaluations of actors or piecemeal and opportunistic causal analyses of chains of events. In attempting to answer this question I will use illustrations from some research projects which I have directed: one study on Swedish public opinion about development and aid, and one study on issues, actors, and forces in current Swedish politics.

3. Some Empirical Findings on Structural and Piecemeal Definitions of Issues

In order to assess empirically whether comprehensive, structural definitions of social issues and problems are better represented than piecemeal definitions in the totality of political communications in a given society, there are a number of positions in the given communication system which must be investigated. In terms of conventional mass-communication theory we should not only assess the views of *senders* of political communications but also the *content* of the political messages actually sent – news as well as commentary. So-called *informal opinion leaders* acting as a transmission-belt between the media and public opinion are also of great interest. Finally, at the receiving end of political communications, *public opinion* itself and the extent to which it represents a holistic, structural or a piecemeal definition of issues should be investigated – and not only to assess the end result of political communications. The common man, even though he is not an informal opinion leader in the strict sense, may express his opinions among his peers, and thus help to reinforce existing opinions.

The limitations of this conventional approach to political communications in terms of senders, media, and receivers will not be discussed in this

context, but indicated later on. Here we will briefly report some of the empirical methods used, and findings obtained in some studies directed by the present author.

In one of these studies which has been reported by Lowe Hedman (1978), we asked a number of questions regarding causes of poverty in developing countries, and on development aid – questions directed not only to a national sample of the Swedish public in general, but also to samples of journalists and local opinion leaders. Even though these questions relate to developing countries and not to images of a capitalist country, they are relevant to our main focus in this paper. Developing countries are in most cases part of the capitalist international order.

The respondents in these sample surveys were asked to indicate on a five-point scale what degree of importance they attached to each one of eleven potential 'causes' of poverty in developing countries. A factor analysis of the answers to these questions rendered three main orthogonal factors, each representing one main type of causal explanation of poverty (Hedman 1978, 57 ff, 199, 222). The first factor was a *historical-structural factor* indicated by high factor loadings on causal explanations like the following: 'World trade operates in a way which is biased against developing countries', or 'Many developing countries have previously been colonies of mainly European countries.' The second factor was a *nature-culture factor* indicated by high factor loadings on causal explanations like the following: 'People in developing countries are by nature not enterprising and hardworking enough.' 'Many developing countries have a religion which encourages passiveness.' The third factor was an *economic-demographic factor* indicated by piecemeal explanations such as overpopulation, lack of capital and industries, and lack of education.

Journalists and local opinion leaders attached greater importance to historical-structural explanations than the general public did (Hedman 1978, 183 ff). However, in the overall national sample we find no evidence that those aspects of public opinion investigated by us – for instance whatever tendency there is to favour historical-structural explanations of poverty – are correlated with mass media exposure. Only those exposing themselves rather extensively to news and specialized reporting exhibit significant correlations of this kind (Hedman 1978, 120). But in such cases we have good reasons to believe that there is an element of self-selection involved; those who select to expose themselves extensively to news and specialized reporting are likely already to have a relatively well-informed and well-structured image of development problems. However, since our survey was designed as a panel study paralleled by an information cam-

paign concerning development problems on television, we could document a slight improvement over time in some cognitive variables among those exposing themselves more extensively to TV. Other relevant findings were that respondents from the national sample with higher levels of education were more likely to favour historical-structural and economic-demographic explanations of poverty in developing countries. This implies that workers with their lower levels of education exhibit on the average lower percentages of such types of explanation. However, workers with a pronounced working-class consciousness (identification with the working class) attribute significantly more importance to the historical-structural mode of explanation; in fact the questions with high loadings on the historical-structural factor render higher percentages of affirmative answers for workers with pronounced working class consciousness than for the sample as a whole (Hedman 1978, 105, 53).

Even though this is by no means the most prominent and statistically significant finding in Lowe Hedman's report, I consider this to be one of the theoretically most significant findings reported by him. Class-consciousness and the definition of social issues and problems emerging from a consciously held working class standpoint are not generally taken account of in sender-media-receiver communication models.

In fact there is a clear difference between such models, and class analysis. A worker conscious of his class position is not simply a 'receiver' of messages from above transformed into subjective opinion and attitudes; his class consciousness articulates his objective predicament in a capitalist system. Later on, we shall report some empirical findings corroborating this statement. Indeed, the worker is also influenced by messages received in the course of his education, his exposure to television etc.; but to consider him only a relatively passive recipient of such messages does not fully explain his definition of the situation. This is also based on his concrete and very personal experience of being a worker. His position as a worker in turn is a reflection of the structure and level of capitalism in the society of which he is a member. To a large extent the capitalist system itself 'informs' the worker directly through his objective predicament about his position and role in society without the involvement of any mass media.

Thus, the structure of the predominant economic system generates at least potential issues which may be passed on to individuals occupying various positions in that system, without the mediation of communication networks. Whether or not these potential issues are brought out in the open depends to a large extent on the openness and responsiveness of the

predominant system of political communication. Here there emerge a number of significant theoretical queries which cannot be discussed at length in this paper: for instance, what are the historical and systemic factors which facilitate or constrain the expression of the historical-structural mode of explanation, as applied in a working class perspective, in the political communications of a given country? We shall return briefly to this kind of question in the final section of this paper. But first there are some more empirical findings to report.

Hedman has found a relatively close relationship between a historical-structural mode of explanation and a system-transcending approach to development aid. Respondents in our various samples were asked to indicate on a scale from one to five how valuable they considered various forms of aid for the developing countries themselves. Again, a factor analysis was carried out on the responses to these questions, and four factors emerged (Hedman 1978, 61, 199 ff, 224). The first factor I interpret as a factor of *system-transcending development aid*. Hedman calls it the political aid factor. This factor is indicated by high factor loadings for statements like the following: 'Supporting those developing countries whose governments favour social equality', 'Pursuing a trade policy which is favourable to the developing countries,' or 'Supporting armed liberation movements which want to accomplish social changes in the developing countries.' Two factors of *piecemeal aid* were found – one relating to private aid (supporting missionaries and supporting investments of private industry in developing countries), and one relating to aid in education, family planning, and relief.

Not only does the historical-structural mode of explanation correlate most clearly with an emphasis on system-transcending aid as I would expect on the basis of the approach indicated in this paper; the historical-structural factor is also strongly correlated with a clear and positive identification with developing countries (Hedman 1978, 240, 98). These findings suggest a substantial consistency between images of underdevelopment, extent of identification, and aid policies favoured by the general public in Sweden.

But the fact that historical-structural explanations and system-transcending aid come out as the first factors in each of the two factor analyses mentioned does not indicate that the underlying dimensions are the ones most favoured in people's minds. The piecemeal economic-demographic model of explanation, and piecemeal aid to education, family planning etc. are most favoured by the general Swedish public. The historical-structural mode of explanation and system-transcending aid comes a good second.

The empirical findings reported so far were not focused on structural versus piecemeal definitions of issues concerning the societies of the repondents themselves, but relating rather to developing countries. Thus working class respondents in the sample survey could no relate these questions directly to their *own* predicaments, but only indirectly by identifying the predicament of underdevelopment as somehow similar to their own predicaments.

However, Göran Ahrne and myself have carried out another study which deals with the images which Swedish blue-collar and white-collar employees have of some aspects of their own society, Sweden (Ahrne et al. 1978). For lack of space we will not here report in detail on the analytical methodology of that study. We developed two scales, one measuring what Frank Parkins (1971, ch. 3) has called an 'oppositional' interpretation of class interests, and another measuring structural versus piecemeal definitions of 'threats' experienced by our respondents (Ahrne et al. 1978, pp. 323–328).

A *structural* definition of threat was operationalized in terms of (1) answers indicating that the capitalist order as such is a threat, and (2) a pattern of answers indicating that unemployment, inflation, environmental pollution, and nuclear power are threats related to capitalism. A *piecemeal* definition of threat was indicated by a pattern of answers indicating unemployment, inflation, etc., as separate threats unrelated to capitalism, and weakly related to each other.

We found that an oppositional interpretation of class interests and a structural definition of threats was most prevalent among members of LO and TCO, trade unions organizing blue-collar and white-collar employees respectively, while it was much less common among unorganized employees, and virtually absent among members of SACO, a union of academically trained employees. Thus, higher education did not in this case favour a structural definition of social issues and problems while, as the reader may recall, it did so with regard to the historical-structural mode of explanation of poverty in developing countries.

No relationship was found between a structural definition of issues and massmedia exposure, and variables relating to leisure time use and consumption styles.

We also have some longitudinal data indicating that Swedish workers today – particularly younger employees – are much more prone than employees twenty years ago to view society in terms of economic power and class conflict. Twenty years ago workers tended to view society in terms of consensual democratic pluralism; the fact that the Social Demo-

cratic party had a majority in Parliament and held all cabinet posts was believed to give labour more influence in society – a belief which prevailed only among a minority of workers in 1976 when the Social Democratic party was still in government (Ahrne 1979, 20 f). These changes in the interpretation of power and influence in society are probably due not to changes in massmedia content or average levels of education among workers, but mainly to increasing contradictions in the capitalist order, a 'deskilling' and routinization of labour, and to higher level of union organization among employees – particularly white-collar workers. Empirical data corroborating these trends will appear in a forthcoming book (Himmelstrand et al. 1980).

To summarize, we have found only weak or insignificant correlations between massmedia exposure and public images of society and development. However, the occurrence of images which imply a historical-structural definition of social and developmental issues correlates significantly with education, and, among the less educated, with working-class identification, type of trade-union membership, and with typical working-class predicaments which thus seem to compensate for lack of education in shaping images of the historical-structural type.

These findings do not motivate a neglect of media content. If the historical-structural image of development or society which was found among journalists fails to be reflected in massmedia content, that is itself a crucial finding in elaborating a model of political communication. Such findings, suggesting the existence of barriers between the views of journalists, and the massmedia content they produce, pose a number of interesting questions about the validity of conventional sender-media-receiver models of political communication, in addition to the questions deriving from weak correlations between massmedia exposure and public images of society.

If massmedia content does not reflect the views of journalists, we may ask whether this content is determined rather by the requirements of commercial news markets, and by the position of journalists in the economic power structure of media. Of course, this remains a conjecture in the absence of empirical data on media content comparable to the opinions expressed in our sample surveys of journalists, local opinion leaders, and the general public, and in the absence of more detailed data on the position of media and journalists with regard to commercial news markets. Lowe Hedman (1979) is presently involved in an exploratory study aimed at developing methods to study some aspects of this problem area. Crucial in this context is the development of techniques of content

analysis which can distinguish piecemeal and structural presentations of news. In a completely different context such techniques have been developed and applied in a study by Henryka Schabowska and Ulf Himmelstrand (1978) on how the events of the Nigeria-Biafra War were reported and interpreted in the African press. Criteria were developed in that study to assess the extent to which events were reported only in a piecemeal fashion, or with background coverage of a biographical, cultural or structural nature, or with reference to more or less opportunistic selections of chains of events presumably leading up to the events reported. Studies utilizing such techniques of content analysis on the massmedia of mature capitalist countries are needed before we can say anything more conclusive on this matter.

4. The Compatibility of a Holistic, Structural Approach with Political Democracy

Brilliant structural designs of society emerging not from below but from an excellent mind which understands the character of contemporary societies cannot be implemented unless they are imposed from above. If such an imposition is at all possible, it is likely to be repressive. On this point, at any rate, I concur with Popper's criticism of holistic or utopian social engineering. But I cannot accept Popper's idea that ameliorative, piecemeal social engineering is the only strategy compatible with an open society, and with the various freedoms inscribed in all genuinely democratic constitutions. Popper, being a philosopher mainly concerned with the ideas and values of an open society, neglects the material and structural aspects of repression which may exist even in societies which in principle subscribe to the freedom of ideas and values. The capitalist mode of production imposes structural constraints and contradictions which, in some cases, may be as severe in terms of human suffering and restrictions on certain types of dissent as a socialist mode of production introduced by violent means, and strictly regulated from above in the shape of holistic social engineering. The totalitarianism of consistent capitalism may not be felt by most intellectuals who hail the ideas of Popper; they are felt by others.

But if both the holistic social engineering found in countries which call themselves socialist, and the piecemeal social engineering found in capitalist countries have their adverse sides, are there any other options? I believe an answer can be found only if we temporarily forget about the

ideas of various types of social engineering, and their *current* practice, and start asking ourselves: Are there any other 'engineers'?

Some visionary social scientists fascinated by the structural aspects of contemporary societies like to act as 'architects' of the future. Their visions could possibly become useful in some contexts, but it is the context which is decisive. Assume that the context consists of large groups or classes of people struggling with the help of their organizations to find a way out of their predicaments. In such contexts, solutions can be invented, often not by social scientists but by creative practitioners who suggest more or less piecemeal or seemingly incidental solutions to the problems at hand. Sometimes such solutions turn out to have implications which go far beyond the piecemeal significance originally anticipated. I suggest that more or less visionary social scientists can play a role in transforming society to build a better future only if they immerse themselves in such contexts of class or group struggle, refraining from enacting the grandiose role of architects of the future, and rather help critically and constructively to evaluate and modify the solutions advanced from below by practitioners participating in such struggles. This can be done, for instance, by helping to place such solutions in a larger structural context in a dialogical and collaborative research relationship with practitioners who have a taste for such dialogue. Ideas like these have been formulated in a recent book by Alain Tournaine (1978). Whether social engineering is piecemeal or holistic, the 'engineers' must be located as close as possible to the grassroots in order not to become 'enemies of the open society'.

In my view the threats to an open society derive only indirectly, if at all, from the dominant types of social engineering. There are two much more serious threats:

1. The shortcomings of our political communications, to the extent that they conceal the crucial structural issues of our times, and make them into non-issues, so preventing the general public from becoming well-informed engineers of their own fate through regular democratic debate and action, and leaving the necessary holistic structural engineering either to non-decision and the garbage-can, or to tiny technocratic or sometimes revolutionary elites which on their own have only an incomplete grasp of the premises of needed societal change. Probably these shortcomings of the political communication system can be explained and remedied only with reference to what could be called a power model of political communications. This brings us to the second threat.
2. The fact that the kind of structural information necessary for an under-

standing and transformation of our contradictory social and economic systems, whether capitalist or 'socialist', is to a large extent excluded from the massmedia due to milder or more severe forms of 'bourgeois hegemony', or state censorship justified in terms of 'socialist' or other kinds of ideologies.

To put it differently: holistic social engineering can be democratic and completely compatible with an open society if only our systems of political communication were more efficeint in reflecting the crucial structural issues of our contemporary societies from the perspective of the great majority of working people rather than in reflecting minority class or state interests. To paraphrase Marx: System-transcending class struggle must be directed not only against the 'fetters' which existing social relations of production place on the forces of production; there are also 'fetters' of information which must be 'burst asunder' in order to free public opinion from its constraints, and to create broad-based democratic support for system change. The toe knows best where the shoe pinches – but it needs collaboration with a brain to design and to make a better shoe. If such collaboration is not accessible or even refused, the toe may start kicking around in a most destructive manner, or worse: accept its constraints, and successively lose its carrying power. How can we then move forward?

In my view such 'fetters' on structural information concerning the contradictions of our socalled mixed economy were quite obvious in the last general election campaign in Sweden in 1979. The two crucial issues which have the most obvious structural significance for Swedish society at present – the nuclear power issue, and the issue of wage-earners' funds – were soft-pedalled in the campaign by most of the politicians themselves, or were transformed into targets for simplistic and piecemeal attacks which completely neglected the relevant structural context. Particularly with regard to the issue of wage-earners' funds, journalists and commentators in the news media were unable, or in some cases perhaps incompetent, to place it on the agenda in a manner suited to unfold its structural significance beyond party-political needs for simplistic propaganda.

How to explain these failures of political communication is a subject matter which goes beyond the scope of this paper. My main purpose here has been to indicate the increasing need for systemic and holistic rather than piecemeal information in complex contemporary societies, to explore tentatively what kind of theoretical vantage points for the specification of such information can be found in Marxism and in mainstream sociology, and finally to suggest empirical methods for the study of such information among senders, media, and receivers of media content. In the

process of discussing these various questions, and the question of compatibility between political democracy and various types of political communication and policy-making, I have left a number of questions unanswered and a number of concepts unspecified, but this is unavoidable in formulating a new and neglected area of research. Many of the unanswered questions, and the unspecified concepts and research techniques in this paper are treated in more detail in a forthcoming book (Himmelstrand et al. 1980).

NOTES

1 The expression 'mainstream sociology' is used here for want of a more appropriate term. The term 'structural functionalism' covers a lot of this ground, but also includes the social anthropological tradition of Radcliff-Brown and his followers. A US sociologist like Ralph Turner (in a personal communication to the present author) has emphasized that only East-Coast sociologists like Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton are structural functionalists in the strict sense; but to label US sociologists in general as structural-functionalist is wrong, according to him. Symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, for instance, should not be subsumed under this label. However, I have here included such sociological traditions together with structural functionalism under the label of 'mainstream sociology' for the following reasons. When structural functionalists in 'the strict sense' specify various structures such as social institutions, status-sets, ranks and role-sets, they usually do it in terms of social norms, rights, obligations, role expectations and similar concepts which refer to value standards or commonly accepted rules. Such concepts are central also in symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology which, however, make less far-reaching assumptions about equilibrating or system-maintaining processes in society at large. Göran Therborn in his seminal work on *Science, Class and Society* (1976) has characterized the kind of sociology I have in mind in terms of its concentration on what he calls 'the ideological community', that is on the significance of shared norms and value-orientations.

2 In earlier editions of a well-known textbook on sociological theory, edited by Coser and Rosenberg, the editors chose to present a few pages of the least analytical and theoretically fertile, and the most political and time-worn pages to be found in the writings of Marx. In the latest edition, however, a selection of pages on alienation and on the contradiction between forces and relations of production have been included. Until quite recently most US textbooks in sociology presented rather simplified accounts of the Marxian terminology of class and class struggle, taken out of their structural and historical context, and conveyed an image of a rather primitive type of conflict theory to innocent sociology students.

3 For an account of how the capitalist state on the one hand responds to the problems generated by capitalism, and on the other creates new problems for the capitalist order by its state intervention, see Ernest Mandel (1968, 649 f).

4 The most controversial concept in this context is the notion of 'surplus value', which has been attacked by conventional economists as unscientific. (See Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 1976, parts three and four). What has made the notion of surplus value particularly controversial is its foundation in the labour theory of value. For a critical assessment of Marxian thinking on this point, see G. N. Halm, 1968, ch. 11. For a more sympathetic view, see three papers by Leif Johansen, Alfredo Medio and H. J. Sherman in Hunt and Schwartz, ed. (1972, 295–364).

5 The 'forms of mystification' which conceal the real nature of the exploitation of labour in the formation of surplus value are discussed by Karl Marx in the final section of *Capital*, Vol. III.

6 However, in Sweden in recent years this kind of repressive ideological selection does not seem to have been as effective as earlier. Established social democratic leaders have increasingly come out with critical remarks about 'capitalism' and the 'market forces' in a way which would have been conceived as impossible some ten or twenty years ago. But when the 'repressive selection' of agenda-setting political bodies thus turns out to be inefficient, there is instead a tendency of the business community to disavow democratic politics as a whole. And to the extent that these voice of the business community are skilfully advertised to the public, they may reintroduce 'repressive selection' into politics through a back-door. For a more detailed discussion of these questions, see Himmelstrand et al. 1980, ch. 10.

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