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Primordial, Personal, Sacred and Civil Ties: Some Particular Observations on the Relationships of Sociological Research and Theory

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# PRIMORDIAL, PERSONAL, SACRED AND CIVIL TIES

Some particular observations on the Relationships of  
Sociological Research and Theory

Edward Shils

## I

**W**HAT sociologists and social anthropologists call the cultural value or belief system of a society can be lived up to only partially, fragmentarily, intermittently and only in an approximate way. The ideals of prophets and saints can take root only when they are attenuated, moderated and compromised with other contradictory ideals and with the demands of the situation and the needs of 'the old Adam'. Ideals and beliefs can only influence conduct alongside of personal ties, primordial attachments, and responsibilities in corporate bodies and they can come into play primarily in the form of vague notions regarding the Right and Good in concrete forms.

Sociologists and anthropologists might make it appear as if every man is implicitly a philosopher and a theologian with a coherent image of the cosmos and society and a hierarchy of standards of preference. This is, however, very far from the truth.

Man is much more concerned with what is near at hand, with what is present and concrete than with what is remote and abstract. He is more responsive on the whole to persons, to the status of those who surround him and the justice which he sees in his own situation than he is with the symbols of remote persons, with the total status system in the society and with the global system of justice. Immediately present authorities engage his mind more than remote ones. The ordinary man is however not a complete idiot in the Greek sense. In a dormant way, semi-conscious and peripheral, he too responds to the central authorities and symbols of the society. From time to time, as occasion requires, he comes more closely into contact with them; his consciousness is opened to them at election time, in times of national troubles, in great ceremonial occasions like the Coronation, in the same way in which an 'Easter and Christmas' communicant enters into communion with divinity on these

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two great annual occasions, at his wedding, at the christening of his children, on the occasion of the death of a kinsman, a family member or a close friend. For the rest of the time, the ultimate values of the society, what is sacred to its members, are suspended amidst the distractions of concrete tasks, which makes the values ambiguous and thus gives freedom for individual innovation, creation, and adaptation.

Those who because of the needs of their personalities and the driving force of their reason come into contact with the symbols of the ultimate in the cosmos or in the sphere of justice and morality are impatient with existing tradition, regardless of whether they are 'progressive' or seek to revive ancient virtues and 'the good old times'. They are impatient with anything less than whole-hearted commitment to the ideal as they see it. That is why the ideologist, be he prophet or revolutionary, is affronted by the ordinary man's attachment to his mates, to his pub, to his family, to his petty vanities in his job, to his vulgar gratifications, to his concern for the improvement of his conditions of life. That is also why the ideologist dislikes the politician, who aspires to do no more than to help to keep things running and to make piecemeal changes, and of course, the businessman, the manager, the technologist who works on a limited front.

Nonetheless the work of keeping society going at all times except moments of extreme crisis is the achievement of the workman at his task, the manager in his plant, the administrator bound by red tape, the father and mother in their family circle, a man among his friends, the expert at his narrow job; in brief, it is the achievement which follows from each person concerning himself with his task and his relationships as they exist around.

As I see it, modern society is no lonely crowd, no horde of refugees fleeing from freedom. It is no *Gesellschaft*, soulless, egotistical, loveless, faithless, utterly impersonal and lacking any integrative forces other than interest or coercion. It is held together by an infinity of personal attachments, moral obligations in concrete contexts, professional and creative pride, individual ambition, primordial affinities and a civil sense which is low in many, high in some, and moderate in most persons. It might be destroyed by modern warfare, or the exhaustion of its resources, the lack of initiative of its inventors and enterprisers might so hurt its competitive position in the economic world that it would be doomed to the pressure of a standard of living below what its members aspire to. Aside from these, it is in no danger of internal disintegration. Whatever danger it faces in this respect would be far less from those who are charged with faithlessness, and the inability to rise above their routine concerns, from the philistines, the dwellers in housing estates and new towns, than from those who think that society needs a new faith to invigorate it and give it a new impulse.

These remarks on some of the bonds which hold a large-scale society

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together have emerged from a long process of research and analysis, a process which began long before I was born and which will go on for a long time after the appearance of *Love, Belief and Civility* in which my own efforts to contribute to the process are contained. When I was asked to speak about the relationships of theory and research, I decided to make my analysis as concrete as possible, especially since the actually subsisting relationships are often obscured and falsified by an excessively schematic, excessively orderly picture. In order to be as concrete as possible I am reporting on my own experience of this relationship between research and theory; it is not because I think that my experience is more profound or more important than that of other workers in our disciplines that I have chosen this autobiographical form, but because I know it best. I think that I can best observe the often slovenly, often haphazard, and often unconscious elements in the relationship of theory and research by scrutinizing my own experience.

## II

In 1887, in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, Tönnies contrasted modern Western society, or *Gesellschaft*, which he saw as expedient, atomized, rationalistic and individualistic, with a state of very intense solidarity, in which individuality was kept in a rudimentary state and which he called *Gemeinschaft*. He saw instances of *Gemeinschaft* in extended families residing together, guilds, village communities, tribal societies, etc. These were all highly integrated, i.e. they had a high degree of conformity of action with expectations and the expectations covered a wide range of the actions of their members. After leaving Tönnies' hands, the notion of *Gemeinschaft* underwent a considerable extension which made explicit some of the implications of Tönnies' notion. A state of intense solidarity with highly affective overtones, even where the strong emotions did not always find direct expression, became one of the major variables in the analysis of social structure. Simmel, in his stress on the extremely individualistic, tradition-destroying forces of modern urban society, was in the same tradition. Durkheim, who was influenced by Comte's image of a society destroyed by rationalistic negativism and individualism, in seeking to establish a contrast with the disintegrated condition of modern Western society, focussed his attention on the same phenomenon as Tönnies, i.e. mechanical solidarity.

On the other side of the ocean, Charles Cooley, just after the turn of the century, and apparently without any connection with either Tönnies' or Durkheim's writings, fastened his attention on the same phenomenon—a state of intense and comprehensive solidarity in a relatively small group in which there is opportunity for direct interaction and a very pronounced feeling of 'we-ness' in which 'individu-

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alities have been fused'. Neighbourhoods, families, the play groups of children were called 'primary groups'. Like Tönnies, Cooley intended to contrast the disagreeable, selfish, conflictful aspects of modern society with the ethos of the primary group. Like Tönnies, Cooley thought that the larger society could take its ethos from the rules of life of the small intensely bound group; he used the term 'primary' because he believed that their 'primary' nature lay in the fact that in such groups the higher ideals which could govern conduct in the larger society were formed.

The primary group became one of the major interests of American sociology in the period up to the beginning of the great depression and the accession to power of Adolf Hitler in Germany. W. I. Thomas and Robert Park, Ernest Burgess and other American writers referred to the family, the play group, the boys' gang, the tightly knit village community, the neighbourhood, as primary groups, all of which—with the exception of the boys' gang—they believed were being increasingly eroded by the individualism, the growth of rationality and large-scale organization, and the dissolution of moral consensus of American urban society. The late Professor Louis Wirth's essay on *Urbanism as a Way of Life* stated in extreme form the contrast between the moral solidarity of the primary group, and the anomic individualism, unrestrained by common moral standards, characteristic of modern urban society.

In 1935 Elton Mayo published *The Human Problems of an Industrial Civilization*, and not long after that T. N. Whitehead published *Leadership in a Free Society*. Both of these writers stressed the 'impoverishment of social relations' in the modern factory by which they meant the absence of strong personal attachments of the workers and staff with each other. They derived all sorts of distressing consequences such as class conflict, industrial inefficiency and the like. (Neither wrote with any indication of awareness of Cooley's, Simmel's, or Tönnies' writings on the same subject.)

In the early 1920's Professor Hermann Schmalenbach, in an essay on 'Die soziologische Kategorie des Bundes' (in *Die Dioskuren*, vol. I), introduced a new note into the analysis of *Gemeinschaft*. Instead of using it to heighten the description of the individualism and moral dissensus of modern society, he analysed the concept itself and discovered that it covered a diversity of phenomena, which truth required to be separated from each other. He saw that it was possible for a state of intense and comprehensive solidarity to exist without those who shared it possessing either a common territory of origin and residence, a common place of work or ties of blood and sexual connection. When these primordial elements were isolated from the original concept of *Gemeinschaft*, the residue was the *Bund*, for which such terms as confraternity, brotherhood, league, band, gang are all poor translations but each of which brings to the fore the element of intense mutual attachment,

independent of primordial ties. Schmalenbach's ideas were not taken up by other German sociologists and they remained utterly unknown in the English-speaking world. Nonetheless, I think that Schmalenbach's essay was the first stage in the turning away from the uncritical contrast, of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, or primary group and the atomized large-scale society.

Before Schmalenbach, Max Weber had expounded an analysis, mostly by definition and classification, of the kindred phenomenon of the charismatic circle of prophet and apostles, and the corresponding conception of the sect as body membership which is a function of the state of mind of the members. The qualifying state of mind was a possession, by an intense relatively unmediated experience of contact with the sacred. Max Weber had gone further than Schmalenbach inasmuch as he saw that the *Bund*-like religious body, the charismatic sect, was disruptive of the civil order. He had also in his famous distinction between *Gesinnungsethik* and *Verantwortungsethik* which paralleled the distinction between 'Sect' and Church, laid the foundations of the distinction between ideological and civil politics. But the foundations were not built upon by Max Weber in his theory of social structure, and they were not perceived by other workers in the same and neighbouring fields. I had read all these writers in the 1930's and failed to draw them into systematic relation with one another. I had been a fairly conscientious student of the Communist and Nazi movements but except for the abduction of the term 'charisma' in an effort to describe the Nazi party in 1938 (before this became the fashion) and my awareness that the Nazis were enamoured of *Gemeinschaft*-like ideas, my theoretical 'knowledge' lay unused.

In this period, I also read with great interest Lenin's *What is to be Done* and had noted his complaint that the working class, if left to itself, would not become revolutionary but would content itself with small improvements in its immediate situation; he had said that except for the active work of full-time professional revolutionaries, no revolution could take place. I utterly failed to see at this time the conceptual parallel of Lenin's distinction between economistic trade unionism and the professional revolutionary, Max Weber's more general distinction between *Alltag* (routine) and charisma, and his distinction between church and sect. It was some years before I perceived that Lenin and Weber were discussing with a frightful urgency the function of one type of primary group in the social system.

In 1941 I began some inquiries among groups of xenophobic nativists and Nazi sympathizers in Chicago. In my interviews with these zealots, and in my reading of their correspondence and publications, I was impressed by their passion for solidarity, their insistence on absolute loyalty of their members to the organization and their paranoid anxiety about the backsliding propensities of their fellow-

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members. They tended to refer every event in their personal affairs and in the larger world to the principles which they and their comrades sought to serve. In the incoherent farrago of the leaders of these groups, I discerned a set of themes: first, a dualistic conception of the world in which light fought against darkness, good against evil, Protestants against everyone else, Christians against everyone else, Americans (the same as Christians) against everyone else, everyone else against Jews and foreigners in an unceasing war for the destiny of the world; second, the need for unbreakable solidarity; third, a conviction of the permanently persistent efforts of the enemy to penetrate the organization of the children of light; fourth, closely connected therewith, a fear of the untrustworthiness of their comrades. To some extent they had assimilated the Nazi ideology from their German American associates, and they were also the heirs of the ideology which the Dearborn Independent and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which was in the air with Middle West throughout the 1920's and 1930's. I got the impression, however, that if the culture of nativist extremism had not been there, my interviewees would have generated it themselves. Many of them were unsuccessful aspirants to charismatic leadership; they were ideologists by nature, however uneducated they were. They were 'natural Manichaeans'.

### III

In the war years, I worked on German civilian and military morale. I had the good fortune for several years from early 1943 to be closely associated with Dr. Henry Dicks, who was at that time beginning to study the personality structure of the Nazi prisoners of war. Their attitudes as they emerged in the course of these investigations began to fall into a pattern which had been formed in my previous studies. The heavy stress on the value of comradeship made me think back to Schmalenbach, and I began in a vague fumbling way to see the German army as an elaborate administrative and logistic framework for a network of primary groups. This insight did not come to me as a result of any clearly perceived prior hypothesis; it was, in fact, forced on me by the German zeal in the use of the word *Gemeinschaft* in all sorts of connections: e.g. *Frontgemeinschaft*, *Kampfgemeinschaft*, etc.

The integration of a large society through attachments which fell short of attachments to the central value system of the society now emerged in my mind as a possibility. It was the first time that the idea occurred to me. The ties which bound these primary groups to the larger structure remained obscure to me. I did not see that they were diverse and I did not see the pattern of their diversity.

There was a phenomenon which we called during the war the 'hard core', that is, the convinced Nazis—obdurate, steadfast, unyielding as soldiers, stiffening and strengthening influences among their fellow

soldiers. There was also the sergeant and the junior officer, more often than not non-Nazi, devoted to his men as a father or older brother would be, concerned to keep them alive while doing his job. At this time, I did not make a clear distinction in my mind between the apolitical officers and sergeants and those with a strong ideological bent, between the paternal, protective person and the 'hard core'. So I failed to perceive the distinction between the personal and the ideological, which later on seemed to me to be extremely significant. I treated both of them as leaders of the small groups, whose spirit permeated followers and strengthened them, each one separately and each one becoming the centre of influence upon his comrades. There were other features of the outlook and conduct of the German soldiers, the need to demonstrate masculinity, the tenderness taboo, the positive appreciation of discipline as a curb on the '*innere Schweinhund*', of which I was made very acutely aware. At that time, however, they did not fit readily into my scheme of analysis of the nature of the military primary group and so they lay, noticed but unused. I saw how the soldier's attachment to his comrades and to the group which they formed held in check his own self-regarding impulses to protect the integrity of his own skin regardless of consequences and how this attachment caused him to accept obligations and expectations when otherwise he might be remiss. The discovery that the primary group—by the stiffening and fortification of weaklings and laggards through example, encouragement and protective affection—influenced military effectiveness was enough at that stage to set my mind at rest.

In 1944, I drafted an elaborate interview schedule which was then used by the interrogators of PWD/SHAEP, with modifications until the end of the war. (In this work I had the collaboration of Dr. Dicks and Professor Morris Janowitz, now of the University of Michigan.) When the war was over, I analysed the material which had been gathered by the interrogators. In the course of this analysis, I realized that Elton Mayo, Whitehead and Rothlisberger, in their studies of industrial morale, had been investigating exactly the same thing as I discovered in my studies of the German Army. They too discovered the influence of small, closely knit groups on the conduct of their members in the performance of tasks set them from the outside.

If I may place my own work at the end of a line of development which ran from Tönnies: *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, I would summarize it as follows: first: Tönnies described a single complex variable: *Gemeinschaft*—containing many heterogeneous elements—and described the ethos and structure of modern society in a way which excluded *Gemeinschaft* in principle; second: Cooley asserted that the ethos of the primary group could and often were adopted as the ethos of the public life of the larger society; third: Max Weber, followed by Schmalenbach, distinguished the elements of intense and comprehensive attachment in



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*Gemeinschaft* from the primordial, ecological and biological bases with which they were merged in Tönnies' idea of *Gemeinschaft*; then Max Weber in his analysis of the tension between charismatic authority and the traditional and rational-legal types of authority disclosed another facet of the relationship between ethos of certain types of primary groups and the working of the larger society; and most important, Weber, by his intimation of the seed of charisma at the root of the rational-legal and traditional types of authority, provided the distinction between intense and moderate attachments to the ultimate values; fourth: Mayo perceived the dependence of the functioning of corporate bodies on the morale of primary groups; fifth: my own observations before and during the war singled out (a) the affinity between political or ideological enthusiasm and a tendency to organize into primary groups; (b) the dependence of corporate efficiency on primary group morale; (c) the role of the mediating or linking person in binding the primary group to the corporate body (for this last point, I found support in Alexander Leighton's studies of the administration of the displaced Japanese camps).

Here were the elements from which I tried to develop my views on the role of primary groups in the reproduction and modification of the larger society.

### IV

In the Autumn of 1947, I presented a course of lectures at the London School of Economics, entitled the Primary Groups in the Social Structure, and repeated this course again in the Autumn of 1948. In this course, I dealt mainly with industrial and military primary groups, to some extent with religious primary groups, especially the store front Revivalist religious sect in the industrial centres in the United States, and the political primary groups such as conspiratorial and revolutionary cells. Although I dealt at some length with their internal structure, I did not attend particularly to the nature of the ties holding the members of the groups together. I devoted some time to the description of identification, in the usual psychoanalytic way, and without entering into elaborate detail, attributed the formation of primary groups and their effectiveness in influencing the conduct of their members to the 'need for love', which I left without further analysis. I simply accepted it as a datum and attributed all primary groups to this—military, industrial, and religious. I did not attempt to refute Cooley's statement about the transmission of the ethos of primary groups into the public sphere but I was sceptical of it since I saw that things were really far more complicated than Cooley believed. I later concluded that the kind of primary group which endows a society with some of its values was one which Cooley had not really considered—the ideological primary group—and that its transmission could take

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place only if there were a real diminution of the intensity with which such values were experienced. At that time, however, I had not yet arrived at a clear distinction between ideological and personal primary groups. I knew they were different from each other and I felt a little uneasy about including religious and political sects as primary groups. They seemed to be different yet they also seemed to belong to the category of groups with a very intense solidarity, which demanded far-reaching individual renunciation on behalf of the group. They were characterized by an extreme 'we-consciousness'. There was much emotion involved in the mutual attachment which made them up. The fact that German Army primary groups contained both political and non-political elements made me think that the difference, although real, was not significant enough to place them into a totally different category, but the difference continued to make me uneasy for some time. I should add that I was also confused by Max Weber's usage of *charisma* in which he treated undifferentiatedly striking personal qualities and possession by the sacred. Attraction by the sacred quality of another individual and by his personality both appeared to be equally charismatic. It was difficult to break through the barrier created by Weber's own failure to distinguish these two possibilities.

In 1949, on the invitation of Professor Lazarsfeld and Merton, I was given the opportunity to reanalyse the material presented in *The American Soldier*, with respect to the role of primary group membership on fighting effectiveness. While I studied the primary group phenomenon in the American Army, I also went back to Georges Sorel, to write an introduction to a new edition of Sorel's *Reflection on Violence*. I now saw what had escaped me in my studies of Sorel two decades before: Sorel, the theorist of the 'heroic' orientation in politics, believed that the right setting for the heroic life was the small conventicle of morally integral individuals who were possessed by the superior revolutionary morality. The correlation between an intense relationship to ultimate values, to sacred objects and symbols on the one side, and a closed conventicular life on the other was brought to the fore by my study of Sorel. The similarity of Sorel's notions of revolutionary heroism and Ernst Junger's appreciation of soldierly comradeship in the *Fronterlebnis*, and the difference between their kind of primary group and that of the largely apolitical American soldier who fought out of a general sense of obligation, comradesly solidarity and the need to demonstrate manliness carried me beyond Schmalenbach into a greater awareness that within what he called the *Bund* there were at least two separate types.

### v

In the Autumn of 1949 and the winter and early spring of 1950, Professor Parsons and I wrote the 'General Statement' and the 'Values,

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Motives and Systems of Action' in *Towards a General Theory of Action*. Only two parts of this will concern us here, first the paradigm of interaction and the classification of the properties of objects. These highly abstract formulations are relevant here because they were thought by me at the time when we made them to clarify certain features of the primary group, and because further work on the primary group has shown wherein they must be revised and reformulated.

In the interaction paradigm, the two partners are treated as responding to each other's expectations and intentions, as perceived by the responding person. It is always, according to the paradigm, the prospective response, in attitude or action, of the other person which motivates our orientation towards him. No attention is paid in the paradigm to the qualitative properties of the individual apart from his approving or disapproving, loving or unloving response. The introduction of the normative element, derived from the culture, does not alter the fact that there is a gap between the interaction paradigm which, as formulated, takes into account only 'personal' relations (dispositional states of mind or qualities) and 'collaborative' relations (performances) and the classification of the properties of objects. The paradigm was not sufficiently differentiated. It did not take into account states of mind entailing beliefs, it did not take into account primordial qualities. Had we differentiated the paradigm a little more, while building in the base which we created, we could have closed the gap which existed between it and the classification of objects, at least with respect to primordial qualities. Had we done so, we would then have improved the classification of objects and made it more realistic.

As it was the classification has turned out to be largely correct but that was due more to inner theoretical necessity and the need for logical coherence than to an appreciation at the time of its connection with reality. It was indeed because we did not try it out on reality at once but we were satisfied with theoretical coherence that it was so cumbersome. Furthermore, although I was already troubled by the distinction between the person as an object and the belief-possessed person, the zealot or enthusiast, and had in my own field studies come directly into collision with the difference, it did not enter into the paradigm at all or into the classification in a realistic way. It was only when I read the work of the Swedish theologian, Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, that I discovered the nature of my unclarity about religious and political revolutionary cells as primary groups. It was also in this connection that I saw what had to be done to repair our classification of objects.

This classification of objects was begun with the awareness, not sufficiently incorporated into the paradigm of interaction, that it was not only the other person's responses to us, that is, his approval or disapproval, or his action in conformity with or deviance from our

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expectations or desires that are significant, but also certain features or characteristics of the person which are not part of his action or of his personal attitude towards us. It had its points of departure into three phenomena: (1) the recognition that in responding to another person, one of the major criteria—and this is taken account of in the interaction-paradigm—is his personality, that is, his temperamental disposition, generally, and relation of that disposition to oneself as a person; (2) the distinction between performance and quality; (3) the distinction between classificatory and relational properties of objects which corresponds to the distinction between universalistic and particularistic orientation (in the pattern variable scheme). It is clear to us from our common sense and general observation, as well as from the analysis of the conception of *Gemeinschaft*, that certain organic and physical properties, certain properties of the organism in relationship to the environment and unconnected with the social structure, had to be taken into account by us, because they were being taken into account in the actions of real, living human beings toward each other. After this came the distinction between 'classificatory', e.g. sex, age, and physical properties and 'relational' properties, e.g. biological relatedness and territorial location, both of which, it will be remembered, are grouped under the qualities of the organism.

So far so good. It may be noticed that we dealt in a very slipshod way with beliefs as properties of objects. They were omitted entirely from the paradigm of interaction, and in the object classification, they are acknowledged to be the objects of orientations, but from our treatment of them in the text, it is clear that we did not perceive their significance in interaction and in the formation of social structures. Beliefs we treated as objects of orientation, but not as objects which are qualities of acting human beings. Although elsewhere in our work we repeatedly argued for the incorporation of cultural symbols in action, we only recognized them insofar as they were the objects of individual cognitive, appreciative or moral evaluation in themselves. The understanding of religious or ideological collectivities had been omitted from our analysis. This was another gap in our theoretical scheme which empirical research has helped to close.

## VI

In the late Spring of 1950, I went to Germany with Dr. Henry Dicks, who was then Nuffield Professor of Psychiatry at Leeds, to organize an inquiry, which I had designed, into the social structure of the Soviet Army in the Second World War. The investigation was conducted through detailed interviews with deserters from the Soviet Army, or from Soviet prisoners of war who had been taken by the Germans and who had remained behind in Western Germany after the end of the

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war. The Soviet soldier's motivation in combat we found drew relatively little sustenance from any attachment to the central political and ideological symbols of the society in which they lived. Motivation came from three other sources instead: One, the morale of the small unit, i.e. the mutual support given by members of the group to each other and particularly the benevolent relationship of the junior officer and the non-commissioned officer to the men; secondly, the cult of manliness; third, diffuse patriotism, often contradictorily to the ideological symbols of the ruling group, and fourth, fear and awe of authority. The resulting picture was very different from *Gemeinschaft* or *Gesellschaft* and insofar as the structure of the Army was a network of *Bund*-like bodies, it was certain not of ideological Bünde. The Soviet Army was a very powerful organization which had a great deal of coherence, yet very little of that coherence seemed to come from attachment to ideological or political symbols, or even intense patriotism.

Here again, empirical analysis has forced a reformulation of theory. In our analysis of systems of value-orientation, we had, although pointing out that they could never be completely integrated, assumed that all parts, however mutually contradictory, were equally objects of orientation of the adult members of the society. The military studies revealed that participation in the central value system was very unequal in intensity and continuity, and that a large social organization could maintain a high degree of effectiveness (integration) with only a modicum of attachment to its value system.

It was possible therefore to correct this assumption without discarding the notion of a central value system. The difference in the degrees of intensity of attachment to a central system of value orientation was already contained in Max Weber's hint that the charismatic sensitivity can slumber within the rational-legal and traditional legitimations of authority. This had been touched on by Professor Parsons as early as *The Structure of Social Action* and I had made something of it in 1948 when I wrote an essay on Max Weber but in our analysis of systems of value orientation we did not distinguish between intense and attenuated attachments to those symbols. I cite this instance only to show to what an extent one's thought is always full of loose ends, and in what way the theoretical loose ends get tied together through research, and often that aspect of the research which is peripheral.

## VII

From the end of 1952, I had the good fortune to be drawn by Michael Young into a loose association with his research on family and kinship in the East End. The family had always been regarded as a primary group by Cooley, Park, Thomas, *et al.* The extended family had been treated as a prototype of the *Gemeinschaft*. Yet it was obviously different

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from the military, industrial and religious primary groups which I and others had previously studied. In our discussions of his early interviews, I observed what Schmalenbach had observed a long time before, namely, that the ecological or primordial base of the *Gemeinschaft* was different from the relationship itself. But there seemed to be something more important than this distinction. As one thought about the strengths and tensions in family attachments, it became apparent that the attachment was not merely to the other family member as a person, but as a possessor of certain especially 'significant relational' qualities, which could only be described as primordial. The attachment to another member of one's kinship group is not just a function of interaction as Professor Homans would have it. It is because a certain ineffable significance is attributed to the tie of blood. Even where affection was not great, the tangibility of the attachment to the other person, by virtue of our perception of his membership in the kinship group, is clearly in evidence. The fact that those both factors operated in many of the more intensely knit families does not demonstrate that the two variables are one, but rather that two types of attachments each move in the same direction. The primordial or ecological basis of *Gemeinschaft* thus seemed to me to be not merely a precondition of the formation of *Gemeinschaft* but a very crucial property of the members which greatly influenced their conduct towards each other. At about this time, I was studying in connection with my work on primary groups Professor A. D. Nock's *Conversion* and Professor Martin P. Nilsson's various books on Greek religion, especially his *Greek Popular Religion*. In these books, the 'coerciveness' of the primordial properties of object, the ties of blood and of common territory was very strikingly portrayed. Nock's distinction between religions of belief and religions of primordial membership—the terms are my own—helped me very much here. Nock, Nilsson and Michael Young's material gave me a clearer idea of the truth of our classification of objects and of where we had been muddled. (I also saw by contrasting the East End families with the religious communities of the last century of the Roman Republic and the first century of the Empire, that the primordial property too could have had sacredness attributed to it. It too could be the object of attachments of different degrees of intensity.) But this would carry us too far afield for present purposes.

## VIII

Cooley's proposition asserted a substantial harmony between the orientations in the primary group and the orientations in the Great Society. He asserted indeed that the values pursued and acknowledged in each of these spheres were identical. Mayo's research on small groups in industry and my own research on small groups in military organiza-

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tions of diverse nationalities have cast considerable doubt on this. Indeed, my own examination of the extent to which the ordinary soldier understood and shared in the purposes of the war and in the symbols of the State on behalf of which the war was being fought, promulgated by the leaders who were directing the war, has shown that acceptance was usually vague, unintense, and although positive, as close to neutrality in concrete situations as it could be without being entirely absent.

I found that persons with an intense preoccupation, continuous and fervent, with the symbols associated with authority in the corporate organization, within which the primary groups were formed, seemed to be very different kinds of people from those who had a looser, more intermittent and less zealous attachment to the symbols. Conversely, those with strong personal attachments, that is attachments to the personal dispositions of their associates, seemed relatively unresponsive to the symbols of the larger society which were incorporated in the authorities of the society and its major organization.

The contemplation of 'ideological primary groups' disclosed the phenomenon of 'over-participation' in the system of ultimate values. The alternatives of 'under-participation', moderate and attenuated participation, and 'over-participation' were crystallized in my mind by an effort which I made in 1953 to describe, according to the theory of action, the structure of an alienated revolutionary party on the basis of autobiographies and personal records of former members, in an attempt to understand the nature of the tie and the resulting structure of persons who regard others in the light of their symbolic rather than personal significance. The central figures in these groups were just the opposite of the 'under-participants'. They were involved in the central value system with great intensity.

Shortly thereafter, in 1954, Mr. Berelson asked me to read and criticize the manuscript of the book which he and Professor Lazarsfeld were writing on the Presidential campaign of 1948 in Elmira, New York. The material gathered in this inquiry showed that the proportion of those with intense and continuous responses to symbols referring to the central value system were in a very small minority. The proportion of those with no response at all was likewise rather small and in between the large majority of the population maintained a very moderate interest which increased with the campaign. There seemed to be normal distribution of attachment to the central symbols of the society. This distribution, which is now displayed by the authors of *Voting* in their last chapter, is the prototype of the relationships which are maintained towards all the elements of the system of values prevailing in any society. Some are very much concerned with them, positively or negatively, some are not at all concerned with them—these are the 'idiots' of whom Aristotle spoke—and most are in varying degrees of

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attenuation and dilution, intermittently concerned with them, acting in many situations from a mixture of considerations of personal attachment and a vague sense of duty in a role, and of a generalized, vague, occasional and sometimes only limiting sense of concern for the whole.

The civil attachment, the moderate pluralistic concern for the whole, among other things, is not the spirit of the primary group. Cooley's great hypothesis seems to fall to the ground when the ethos and tone necessary for the maintenance of civil society is seen to be inimical to the fervour and passion of the primary group. The ways in which the three different types of primary groups do, nonetheless, contribute to the integration of society, must however continue to be one of the major subjects of sociological inquiry.

### IX

I have dared to tell this rambling tale of my intellectual wanderings because I have thought that it might help sociologists to obtain a more just conception of the collaboration of research and theory. I think that the prevailing conceptions of this collaboration are usually erroneous. The earlier view of a steady progress from particular facts to general theories has now been replaced by the more sophisticated image of a hypothesis, derived from a general theory, being tested by a systematic scrutiny of particular facts: then the theory is either disconfirmed by the facts and is replaced by one more adequate to them or the hypothesis and corresponding theory are confirmed and the problem is settled. There are variations and complications of this latter schema but in all essentials this account of it is correct. It sees the relationship as an orderly process of truth. But in reality, nothing could be less truthful than this picture of scientific growth.

The growth of knowledge is a disorderly movement. It is full of instances of things known and overlooked, unexpected emergencies, and rediscoveries of long known facts and hypotheses which in the time of their original discovery had no fitting articulation and which found such articulation only after a considerable time. It was for the purpose of giving a relatively realistic picture of this disorderly process on a very narrow front that I have offered this record of my own experience.

It is an interesting question as to why sociologists hold this incorrect view of the relations between theory and research. Part of the difficulty arises from an erroneous conception of the nature of the growth of truth in physics, chemistry and the other well established and esteemed sciences. Part of the error arises, however, from the position of the sociologists in the scientific community.

Sociologists are at present, despite their increased numbers and prosperity, a depressed class. They feel themselves outside the pale of the more reputable sciences and they wish very much to be within it.



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They look for their elevation to 'a theory' which will compel their general recognition. At the same time the theories which command attention in sociology are very abstract, very difficult to understand and even more difficult to use in the understanding of the world as we know it from our experience. They are especially difficult and probably impossible to use at present in the way in which sociologists think a scientific theory ought to be used.

These impediments do not in my opinion make them valueless in advancing our understanding. Far from it. In order, however, for these theories to improve our understanding they must be deprived of their salvatory and even of their awe-inspiring character. Sociologists must cease to look upon them as finished products, waiting to be applied, *in toto*, in an orderly and systematic way. They must be taken as general guides and not as specific directives. They must be brought into operation only on the basis of a feeling of personal intimacy. They must be used only after an osmotic assimilation which involves discriminating acceptance and rejection, which rests on the sense of fitness and appropriateness rather than on any formal test. Although this counsel is full of pitfalls, I would say that sociologists will learn to use theory when they have also learned to trust their unconscious discriminatory powers. These might often be wrong, but without them there is little hope.

Theory will bear fruit in sociology only when it has been assimilated into the perception of concrete and particular events, and not as long as it is thought to be something which comes before and emerges from research. Sociological theory must be the explicit articulation of our thought about concrete events, and the explication of the presuppositions and implications of the thought so articulated. To put it differently it must be the comparison and not the court of judgment of our concrete observation. Only under those conditions will it enrich our research into particular situations and only then will it be enriched by that research.