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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Jun., 1957), pp. 106-120

Published by: [Wiley](#) on behalf of [The London School of Economics and Political Science](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/587363>

Accessed: 25/02/2013 14:13

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# THE ROLE-SET: PROBLEMS IN SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Robert K. Merton

IN THE FIRST VOLUME of the first American journal devoted entirely to the subject of sociology, the role proper to the sociologist was described in these forthright terms: 'Social theorists need be meek men, and should stand with head uncovered before the special gifts and services of the men of genius who are working the latter-day miracles of industry and commerce.'<sup>1</sup> This was announced in 1895. A few years later, Émile Durkheim, who by all accounts was not apt to take up this diffident and admiring position before anyone, least of all businessmen, was reminding his readers that sociology was 'born only yesterday', indeed, that 'in the fifteen years before 1900, it was possible to mention only ten names which were truly and properly the names of sociologists'.<sup>2</sup>

Since sociologists have plainly not inherited the earth, we can suppose that those who came after Durkheim have also been unable to remain meek-mannered men. In any event, it is plain that the condition of scanty numbers of sociologists has greatly changed, in the short space of a half-century. Sociologists are now numbered by hundreds in Europe and by thousands in the United States. (I understand, incidentally, that some Englishmen, both within and without the profession of sociology, have been heard to say, 'too *many* thousands, by far'.) Although it may at first seem that these numbers have been growing in geometrical ratio, and although the *Times Literary Supplement* continues to urge Malthusian checks upon this overly-abundant population of sociologists, the fact is that there are clearly far too few to do the numerous jobs which sociology, partly by theoretic commitment and partly by default of other disciplines, now includes within its province. There have been advances of sociological knowledge, of course, but these have been sparse and uneven, proceeding in relative depth at a few places along the front, but remaining thin at many others. The historian of our discipline should see this matter of numbers comparatively. There are indeed about four thousand sociologists in the United States, a very large number, when compared with those of a generation or two ago, but a

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very small number when compared with the 80,000 chemists, the 60,000 physicists, and even the 20,000 psychologists. I do not intend to emphasize numbers above all, but as has been remarked of other disciplines, it requires many thousands of men working methodically with improved methods for a lifetime, if knowledge in a discipline is to accumulate rapidly, rather than slowly and imperceptibly.<sup>3</sup>

As the numbers of sociologists have increased, they have become, in accord with the Spencerian thesis, more differentiated. It is now possible to identify some thirty to forty fields of prime specialization in sociology, and it must be supposed that this differentiation will continue. Even in the unlikely circumstance that self-selection should result in an even distribution among these specialities, there would still be, even among the large number of American sociologists, an average of only one hundred to work each field—to teach the myriads of students who seek some understanding of the social world they never made, to advance knowledge through disciplined inquiry, to relate what knowledge we have to problems of social policy, and to withstand the assaults upon sociology which are periodically mounted by intelligent, anxious and sometimes uninformed laymen. In the aggregate, and contrasted with what has gone before, the proliferation of sociologists and sociological specialities may seem excessive; functionally, in relation to the work that needs to be done, the field of sociology is still sparsely settled and undermanned.

Just as sociology has experienced changes in numbers of personnel, so it has experienced changes in the foci and the methods of inquiry. These changes are registered in the changing spectrum of sociological theory. One of the principal changes has been in the character of the tasks which sociological theorists set themselves. With a few prominent exceptions, such as Sorokin and (though he might disown the characterization) Toynbee, sociologists no longer follow in the spacious footsteps of a Comte, Marx, or Spencer who, each in his own way, tried to work out an historical sociology which would put the entire course of human society into single perspective.

For better or for worse, and this has surely meant that great historical erudition has become almost vestigial among sociologists, sociological theory is no longer focussed on setting out the historical panorama of human society in a series of cycles, phases, or stages.<sup>4</sup>

Durkheim, who must share with Weber the biologically improbable but historically possible responsibility of fathering modern sociology, took a quite different tack and adopted a quite different theoretical commitment. Rather than trying to reconstruct and to forecast the historical patterns of human society, he developed analytical ideas designed to provide broad theoretical underpinnings for the discipline and tried to sharpen these ideas through a series of empirical monographs. His pre-eminent contribution was to clarify the functions of

social norms, and their relations to distinct kinds of social structure. Unlike Durkheim, Weber drew upon a breadth of historical knowledge almost incomparable in his day, but he too aimed to develop a wide-ranging systematic theory centred largely on the analysis of the relations of value-systems to the organization of material resources and other parts of the social structure.

Today, I think it fair to say, the work of Talcott Parsons represents the one major effort to develop a comprehensive sociological theory. This aims to state the fundamental variables of social systems, rather than to furnish substantive solutions, all proceeding from the head of one man, to the numerous problems phrased in terms of these variables. A general theory, such as this one, is intended to locate other sociological theories as special cases; it must therefore include variables of a high order of abstractness. As an avowed effort to work towards a comprehensive theory, it is logically akin though obviously not substantively analogical to a theory such as that of classical mechanics. It is too soon to say what the outcome of this effort will be. It has the merit, as recent experience has shown, of providing theoretical guidance for diverse empirical inquiry. It has the practical difficulty, however, of being so rapidly elaborated that its development must far outrun the pace of systematic studies designed to put the ideas to empirical test. This, then, is one direction being taken by contemporary sociological theory.

Apart from such general theory, there have been developing theories, also analytical and systematic, of far more limited scope, these involving sets of ideas which can be described as theories of the middle range—theories, for example, of reference groups and social mobility, of communication, role-conflict and the formation of social norms. These theories also involve abstractions, of course, but abstractions not so far removed from the data of sociological observation.

The principal basis of advancing sociological theory today consists, I believe, in much the same modest and limited development of ideas which occurred in the early modern period of other sciences, from natural history to chemistry and physics. Such theories of the middle range consist of sets of relatively simple ideas, which link together a limited number of facts about the structure and functions of social formations and suggest further observations. They are theories intermediate to comprehensive analytical schemes and detailed workaday hypotheses. The conception of this type of theory is of course not new: there are allusions to it in Plato; Bacon made much of 'intermediate or middle axioms' as did John Stuart Mill. But it seems to me particularly important to emphasize the distinctive value of such limited theories in a science, such as ours, in which concepts and classification play such a major part, whereas few or no quantitative laws have yet been discovered.<sup>5</sup>

In emphasizing what seems to me the distinctive importance of

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theories of the middle range, I would prefer not to be misunderstood. There is, of course, no contradiction between such theories and more comprehensive theory, such as that advanced by Parsons. Nor am I suggesting that *only* theories of the middle range merit our attention. After all, sociology is a large house of many mansions. Moreover in intellectual work as in manual work, most of us have a way of finding certain activities congenial, and it would be self-deceiving to assume that our tastes play no part in the kind of theoretical work we prefer to do. To project our 'temperamental' bents into a general imperative may be tempting but nonetheless ill-considered. There is no substitute for such efforts as Parsons's to develop a wide-ranging and comprehensive theory of the social system as a whole, which will incorporate, with successive modifications, more highly delimited theories. But, by the same token, there is room also for another kind of theorizing which is, at the outset, and for some time to come, limited to more restricted ranges of phenomena than those encompassed by a system of thought like that of Parsons. The two kinds of inquiry can usefully follow their own course, with periodic reconnaissances to see to what extent specific theories of a limited range of phenomena are found to be consistent with the theory of larger scope. On this view, the consolidation of delimited theories in sociology largely comes about through successive convergence of initially disparate ideas, convergences of the kind which Parsons himself worked out in analysing the work of Weber and Durkheim, Marshall and Pareto.

Theories of the middle range are theories about a delimited range of social phenomena. They can be recognized, in part, by their very labels: one speaks of a theory of reference groups, a theory of prices, or a germ theory of disease. The basic ideas are relatively simple: consider Gilbert on magnetism, Boyle on atmospheric pressure, or Darwin on the formation of coral atolls. Gilbert begins with the relatively simple idea that the earth may be conceived as a magnet; Boyle, with the simple idea that one can conceive the atmosphere as a 'sea of air'; Darwin, with the idea that one can conceive of the atolls as monuments over islands long since subsided into the sea. Each of these cases sets out a relatively simple way of conceiving a delimited range of phenomena.

These ideas give rise to a limited number of inferences about the phenomena in question. To take but one case: if the atmosphere is conceived as a sea of air, then, as Pascal inferred, there should be less air pressure on a mountain-top than at its base. The initial idea is, in some measure, put to the test of observation by seeing whether these inferences turn out to be empirically so, and whether the idea suggests other, newly observed, characteristics of magnetism, or of atmosphere pressure, as the case may be. As more of these implications are drawn from the original fairly uncomplicated idea, and are empirically confirmed, there emerges what may fairly be called a 'theory of the

magnetism of the earth' or 'a theory of atmospheric pressure'. These are theories of the middle range: adequate to account for selected aspects of a delimited range of phenomena, and subject to being consolidated with others of like kind into a more comprehensive set of ideas.

Once mentioned, these illustrations from outside the field of sociology can be dropped from view. For these simple ideas drawn from the early days of physical science in the seventeenth century and of earth science in the nineteenth, are not, of course, being presented as substantive analogies to current sociological ideas of, say, attractions and repulsions between groups, or of differing degrees of social pressure. It is the relatively simple logical structure which they exhibit that is pertinent, not their specific content. Contemporary sociological theories of the middle range may not uniformly have the cogency or power of such earlier examples of physical and natural science, but they do exhibit the same uncomplicated logical structure. Rather than consider sociological theories of the middle range in general, I shall examine one small example in the hope that it will exhibit the design of one kind of structural and functional analysis.

#### THE PROBLEMATICS OF THE ROLE-SET

However much they may differ in other respects, contemporary sociological theorists are largely at one in adopting the premise that social statuses and social roles comprise major building blocks of social structure. This has been the case, since the influential writings of Ralph Linton on the subject, a generation ago. By status, and T. H. Marshall has indicated the great diversity of meanings attached to this term since the time of Maine.<sup>6</sup> Linton meant a position in a social system involving designated rights and obligations; by role, the behaviour oriented to these patterned expectations of others. In these terms, status and roles become concepts serving to connect culturally defined expectations with the patterned conduct and relationships which make up a social structure. Linton went on to state the long recognized and basic fact that each person in society inevitably occupies multiple statuses and that each of these statuses has an associated role.

It is at this point that I find it useful to depart from Linton's conception. The difference is initially a small one, some might say so small as not to deserve notice, but it involves a shift in the angle of vision which leads, I believe, to successively greater differences of a fundamental kind. Unlike Linton, I begin with the premise that each social status involves not a single associated role, but an array of roles. This basic feature of social structure can be registered by the distinctive but not formidable term, role-set. To repeat, then, by role-set I mean that complement of role-relationships in which persons are involved by virtue of occupying a particular social status. Thus, in our current



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studies of medical schools,<sup>7</sup> we have begun with the view that the status of medical student entails not only the role of a student *vis-à-vis* his teachers, but also an array of other roles relating him diversely to other students, physicians, nurses, social workers, medical technicians, and the like. Again, the status of school teacher in the United States has its distinctive role-set, in which are found pupils, colleagues, the school principal and superintendent, the Board of Education, professional associations, and, on occasion, local patriotic organizations.

It should be made plain that the role-set differs from what sociologists have long described as 'multiple roles'. By established usage, the term multiple role refers not to the complex of roles associated with a single social status, but with the various social statuses (often, in differing institutional spheres) in which people find themselves—for illustration, the statuses of physician, husband, father, professor, church elder, Conservative Party member and army captain. (This complement of distinct statuses of a person, each of these in turn having its own role-set, I would designate as a status-set. This concept gives rise to its own range of analytical problems which cannot be considered here.)

The notion of the role-set reminds us, in the unlikely event that we need to be reminded of this obstinate fact, that even the seemingly simple social structure is fairly complex. All societies face the functional problem of articulating the components of numerous role-sets, the functional problem of managing somehow to organize these so that an appreciable degree of social regularity obtains, sufficient to enable most people most of the time to go about their business of social life, without encountering extreme conflict in their role-sets as the normal, rather than the exceptional, state of affairs.

If this relatively simple idea of role-set has any theoretical worth, it should at the least generate distinctive problems for sociological theory, which come to our attention only from the perspective afforded by this idea, or by one like it. This the notion of role-set does. It raises the general problem of identifying the social mechanisms which serve to articulate the expectations of those in the role-set so that the occupant of a status is confronted with less conflict than would obtain if these mechanisms were not at work. It is to these social mechanisms that I would devote the rest of this discussion.

Before doing so, I should like to recapitulate the argument thus far. We depart from the simple idea, unlike that which has been rather widely assumed, that a single status in society involves, not a single role, but an array of associated roles, relating the status-occupant to diverse others. Secondly, we note that this structural fact, expressed in the term role-set, gives rise to distinctive analytical problems and to corresponding questions for empirical inquiry. The basic problem, which I deal with here, is that of identifying social mechanisms, that is, processes having designated effects for designated parts of the social

structure, which serve to articulate the role-set more nearly than would be the case, if these mechanisms did not operate. Third, unlike the problems centred upon the notion of 'multiple roles', this one is concerned with social arrangements integrating the expectations of those in the role-set; it is not primarily concerned with the familiar problem of how the occupant of a status manages to cope with the many, and sometimes conflicting, demands made of him. It is thus a problem of social structure, not an exercise in the no doubt important but different problem of how individuals happen to deal with the complex structures of relations in which they find themselves. Finally, by way of setting the analytical problem, the logic of analysis exhibited in this case is developed wholly in terms of the elements of social structure, rather than in terms of providing concrete historical description of a social system.

All this presupposes, of course, that there is always a *potential* for differing and sometimes conflicting expectations of the conduct appropriate to a status-occupant among those in the role-set. The basic source of this potential for conflict, I suggest—and here we are at one with theorists as disparate as Marx and Spencer, Simmel and Parsons—is that the members of a role-set are, to some degree, apt to hold social positions differing from that of the occupant of the status in question. To the extent that they are diversely located in the social structure, they are apt to have interests and sentiments, values and moral expectations differing from those of the status-occupant himself. This, after all, is one of the principal assumptions of Marxist theory, as it is of all sociological theory: social differentiation generates distinct interests among those variously located in the structure of the society. To continue with one of our examples: the members of a school board are often in social and economic strata which differ greatly from that of the school teacher; and their interests, values and expectations are consequently apt to differ, to some extent, from those of the teacher. The teacher may thus become subject to conflicting role-expectations among such members of his role-set as professional colleagues, influential members of the school board, and, say, the Americanism Committee of the American Legion. What is an educational essential for the one may be judged as an education frill, or as downright subversion, by the other. These disparate and contradictory evaluations by members of the role-set greatly complicate the task of coping with them all. The familiar case of the teacher may be taken as paradigmatic. What holds conspicuously for this one status holds, in varying degree, for the occupants of all other statuses who are structurally related, through their role-set, to others who themselves occupy diverse positions in society.

This, then, is the basic structural basis for potential disturbance of a role-set. And it gives rise, in turn, to a double question: which social mechanisms, if any, operate to counteract such instability of role-sets and, correlatively, under which circumstances do these social mechan-



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isms fail to operate, with resulting confusion and conflict. This is not to say, of course, that role-sets do invariably operate with substantial efficiency. We are concerned here, not with a broad historical generalization to the effect that social order prevails, but with an analytical problem of identifying social mechanisms which produce a greater degree of order than would obtain, if these mechanisms were not called into play. Otherwise put, it is theoretical sociology, not history, which is of interest here.

### SOCIAL MECHANISMS ARTICULATING ROLE-SETS

1. *Relative importance of various statuses.* The first of these mechanisms derives from the oft-noticed sociological circumstance that social structures designate certain statuses as having greater importance than others. Family and job obligations, for example, are defined in American society as having priority over membership in voluntary associations.<sup>8</sup> As a result, a particular role-relationship may be of peripheral concern for some; for others it may be central. Our hypothetical teacher, for whom this status holds primary significance, may by this circumstance be better able to withstand the demands for conformity with the differing expectations of those comprising his role-set. For at least some of these others, the relationship has only peripheral significance. This does not mean, of course, that teachers are not vulnerable to demands which are at odds with their own professional commitments. It means only that when powerful members of their role-set are only little concerned with this particular relationship, teachers are less vulnerable than they would otherwise be (or sometimes are). Were all those involved in the role-set equally concerned with this relationship, the plight of the teacher would be considerably more sorrowful than it often is. What holds for the particular case of the teacher presumably holds for the occupants of other statuses: the impact upon them of diverse expectations among those in their role-set is mitigated by the basic structural fact of differentials of involvement in the relationship among those comprising their role-set.

2. *Differences of power of those in the role-set.* A second potential mechanism for stabilizing the role-set is found in the distribution of power and authority. By power, in this connection, is meant the observed and predictable capacity to impose one's will in a social action, even against the opposition of others taking part in that action; by authority, the culturally legitimized organization of power.

As a consequence of social stratification, the members of a role-set are not apt to be equally powerful in shaping the behaviour of status-occupants. However, it does not follow that the individuals, group, or stratum in the role-set which are *separately* most powerful uniformly succeed in imposing their demands upon the status-occupant, say, the

teacher. This would be so only in the circumstance that the one member of the role-set has either a monopoly of power in the situation or outweighs the combined power of the others. Failing this special but, of course, not infrequent, situation, there may develop *coalitions of power* among some members of the role-set which enable the status-occupants to go their own way. The familiar pattern of a balance of power is of course not confined to the conventionally-defined political realm. In less easily visible form, it can be found in the workings of role-sets generally, as the boy who succeeds in having his father's decision offset his mother's opposed decision has ample occasion to know. To the extent that conflicting powers in his role-set neutralize one another, the status-occupant has relative freedom to proceed as he intended in the first place.

Thus, even in those potentially unstable structures in which the members of a role-set hold contrasting expectations of what the status-occupant should do, the latter is not wholly at the mercy of the most powerful among them. Moreover, the structural variations of engagement in the role-structure, which I have mentioned, can serve to reinforce the relative power of the status-occupant. For to the extent that powerful members of his role-set are not centrally concerned with this particular relationship, they will be the less motivated to exercise their potential power to the full. Within varying margins of his activity, the status-occupant will then be free to act as he would.

Once again, to reiterate that which lends itself to misunderstanding, I do not say that the status-occupant subject to conflicting expectations among members of his role-set is in fact immune to control by them. I suggest only that the power and authority-structure of role-sets is often such that he has a larger measure of autonomy than he would have had if this structure of competing power did not obtain.

3. *Insulation of role-activities from observability by members of the role-set.* People do not engage in continuous interaction with all those in their role-sets. This is not an incidental fact, to be ignored because familiar, but one integral to the operation of social structure. Interaction with each member of a role-set tends to be variously intermittent. This fundamental fact allows for role-behaviour which is at odds with the expectations of some in the role-set to proceed without undue stress. For, as I elsewhere suggest at some length,<sup>9</sup> effective social control presupposes social arrangements making for the observability of behaviour. (By observability, a conception which I have borrowed from Simmel and tried to develop, I mean the extent to which social norms and role-performances can readily become known to others in the social system. This is, I believe, a variable crucial to structural analysis, a belief which I cannot, unhappily, undertake to defend here.)

To the extent that the social structure insulates the individual from having his activities known to members of his role-set, he is the less

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subject to competing pressures. It should be emphasized that we are dealing here with structural arrangements for such insulation, not with the fact that this or that person *happens* to conceal part of his role-behaviour from others. The structural fact is that social statuses differ in the extent to which the conduct of those in them are regularly insulated from observability by members of the role-set. Some have a functionally significant insulation of this kind, as for example, the status of the university teacher, insofar as norms hold that what is said in the classroom is privileged. In this familiar type of case, the norm clearly has the function of maintaining some degree of autonomy for the teacher. For if they were forever subject to observation by all those in the role-set, with their often differing expectations, teachers might be driven to teach not what they know or what the evidence leads them to believe, but to teach what will placate the numerous and diverse people who are ostensibly concerned with 'the education of youth'. That this sometimes occurs is evident. But it would presumably be more frequent, were it not for the relative exemption from observability by all and sundry who may wish to impose their will upon the instructor.

More broadly, the concept of privileged information and confidential communication in the professions has this same function of insulating clients from observability of their behaviour and beliefs by others in their role-set. Were physicians or priests free to tell all they have learned about the private lives of their clients, the needed information would not be forthcoming and they could not adequately discharge their functions. More generally, if all the facts of one's conducts and beliefs were freely available to anyone, social structures could not operate. What is often described as 'the need for privacy'—that is, insulation of actions and beliefs from surveillance by others—is the individual counterpart to the functional requirement of social structure that some measure of exemption from full observability be provided. 'Privacy' is not only a personal predilection, though it may be that, too. It is also a requirement of social systems which must provide for a measure, as they say in France, of *quant-à-soi*, a portion of the self which is kept apart, immune from observation by others.

Like other social mechanisms, this one of insulation from full observability can, of course, miscarry. Were the activities of the politician or, if one prefers, the statesman, fully removed from the public spotlight, social control of his behaviour would be correspondingly reduced. And as we all know, anonymous power anonymously exercised does not make for a stable social structure meeting the values of a society. So, too, the teacher or physician who is largely insulated from observability may fail to live up to the minimum requirements of his status. All this means only that some measure of observability of role-performance by members of the role-set is required, if the indispensable social requirement of accountability is to be met. This statement does not contradict

an earlier statement to the effect that some measure of insulation from observability is also required for the effective operation of social structures. Instead, the two statements, taken in conjunction, imply that there is an optimum zone of observability, difficult to identify in precise terms and doubtless varying for different social statuses, which will simultaneously make both for accountability and for substantial autonomy, rather than for a frightened acquiescence with the distribution of power which happens, at a particular moment, to obtain in the role-set.

4. *Observability of conflicting demands by members of a role-set.* This mechanism is implied by what has been said and therefore needs only passing comment here. As long as members of the role-set are happily ignorant that their demands upon the occupants of a status are incompatible, each member may press his own case. The pattern is then many against one. But when it becomes plain that the demands of some are in full contradiction with the demands of others, it becomes, in part, the task of members of the role-set, rather than that of the status-occupant, to resolve these contradictions, either by a struggle for over-riding power or by some degree of compromise.

In such circumstances, the status-occupant subjected to conflicting demands often becomes cast in the role of the *tertius gaudens*, the third (or more often, the  $n^{\text{th}}$ ) party who draws advantage from the conflict of the others. Originally at the focus of the conflict, he can virtually become a bystander whose function it is to highlight the conflicting demands being made by members of his role-set. It becomes a problem for them, rather than for him, to resolve their contradictory demands. At the least, this serves to make evident that it is not wilful misfeasance on his part which keeps him from conforming to all the contradictory expectations imposed upon him.<sup>10</sup> When most effective, this serves to articulate the expectations of those in the role-set beyond a degree which would occur, if this mechanism of making contradictory expectations manifest were not at work.

5. *Mutual social support among status-occupants.* Whatever he may believe to the contrary, the occupant of a social status is not alone. The very fact that he is placed in a social position means that there are others more or less like-circumstanced. To this extent, the actual or potential experience of facing a conflict of expectations among members of the role-set is variously common to all occupants of the status. The particular persons subject to these conflicts need not, therefore, meet them as wholly private problems which must be coped with in wholly private fashion.

It is this familiar and fundamental fact of social structure, of course, which is the basis for those in the same social status forming the associations intermediate to the individual and the larger society in a pluralistic system. These organizations constitute a structural response

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to the problems of coping with the (potentially or actually) conflicting demands by those in the role-sets of the status.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the intent, these constitute social formations serving to counter the power of the role-set; of being, not merely amenable to its demands, but of helping to shape them. Such organizations—so familiar a part of the social landscape of differentiated societies—also develop normative systems which are designed to anticipate and thereby to mitigate such conflicting expectations. They provide social support to the individuals in the status under attack. They minimize the need for their improvising personal adjustments to patterned types of conflicting expectations. Emerging codes which state in advance what the socially-supported conduct of the status-occupant should be, also serve this social function. This function becomes all the more significant in the structural circumstances when status-occupants are highly vulnerable to pressures from their role-set because they are relatively isolated from one another. Thus, thousands of librarians sparsely distributed among the towns and villages of America and not infrequently subject to censorial pressures received strong support from the code on censorship developed by the American Library Association.<sup>12</sup> This only illustrates the general mechanisms whereby status-peers curb the pressures exerted upon them individually by drawing upon the organizational and normative support of their peers.

6. *Abriding the role-set.* There is, of course, a limiting case in the modes of coping with incompatible demands by the role-set. Role-relations are broken off, leaving a greater consensus of role-expectations among those who remain. But this mode of adaptation by amputating the role-set is possible only under special and limited conditions. It can be effectively utilized only in those circumstances where it is still possible for status-occupants to perform their other roles, without the support of those with whom they have discontinued relations. It presupposes that the social structure provides this option. By and large, however, this option is infrequent and limited, since the composition of the role-set is ordinarily not a matter of personal choice but a matter of the social organization in which the status is embedded. More typically, the individual goes, and the social structure remains.

## RESIDUAL CONFLICT IN THE ROLE-SET

Doubtless, these are only some of the mechanisms which serve to articulate the expectations of those in the role-set. Further inquiry will uncover others, just as it will probably modify the preceding account of those we have provisionally identified. But, however much the substance may change, I believe that the logic of the analysis will remain largely intact. This can be briefly recapitulated.

First, it is assumed that each social status has its organized complement of role-relationships which can be thought of as comprising a

role-set. Second, relationships hold not only the between occupant of the particular status and each member of the role-set, but always potentially and often actually, between members of the role-set itself. Third, to the extent that members of the role-set themselves hold substantially differing statuses, they will tend to have some differing expectations (moral and actuarial) of the conduct appropriate for the status-occupant. Fourth, this gives rise to the sociological problem of how their diverse expectations become sufficiently articulated for the status-structure and the role-structure to operate with a modicum of effectiveness. Fifth, inadequate articulation of these role-expectations tends to call one or more social mechanisms into play, which serve to reduce the extent of patterned conflict below the level which would be involved if these mechanisms were not at work.

And now, sixth, finally and importantly, even when these (and probably other) mechanisms are operating, they may not, in particular cases, prove sufficient to reduce the conflict of expectations below the level required for the social structure to operate with substantial effectiveness. This residual conflict within the role-set may be enough to interfere materially with the effective performance of roles by the occupant of the status in question. Indeed, it may well turn out that this condition is the most frequent one—role-systems operating at considerably less than full efficiency. Without trying to draw tempting analogies with other types of systems, I suggest only that this is not unlike the case of engines which cannot fully utilize heat energy. If the analogy lacks force, it may nevertheless have the merit of excluding the utopian figment of a perfectly effective social system.

We do not yet know some of the requirements for fuller articulation of the relations between the occupant of a status and members of his role-set, on the one hand, and for fuller articulation of the values and expectations among those comprising the role-set, on the other. As we have seen, even those requirements which can now be identified are not readily satisfied, without fault, in social systems. To the extent that they are not, social systems are forced to limp along with that measure of ineffectiveness and inefficiency which is often accepted because the realistic prospect of decided improvement seems so remote as sometimes not to be visible at all.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The author was C. R. Henderson, the social meliorist and professor of sociology in the University of Chicago: 'Business men and social theorists', *American Journal of Sociology*, 1895-96, 1, 385-97, at 389.

<sup>2</sup> Émile Durkheim, 'La sociologie et son domaine scientifique', first published

in *Rivista Italiana di Sociologia*, 1900, 4, 127 ff., but coming to my attention only after it was reprinted as an appendix to Armand Cuvilliers' *Où va la sociologie française?* (Paris: Librairie Marcel Rivière et Cie, 1953), 178-208.

<sup>3</sup> L. J. Henderson made these matter-of-fact observations some time ago, but,



evident as they are, they often drop from view. See his comparison between the character of organic chemistry and of sociology, in *Pareto's General Sociology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1935), 107-8.

<sup>4</sup> On the general issue, see the observations of Ernest Nagel. 'Despite the variability and instability of social phenomena, they may nevertheless be subsumable under a common theory . . . though whether this is more than a fancy is at present any man's guess. But some things are fairly clear. If a comprehensive social theory is ever achieved, it will not be a theory of historical development, according to which societies and institutions succeed one another in a series of inevitable changes. Those who are seeking a comprehensive social theory by charting the rise and decline of civilizations, are looking for it in the wrong place. The theory will undoubtedly have to be highly abstract, if it is to cut across the actual cultural differences in human behaviour. Its concept will have to be apparently remote from the familiar and obvious traits found in any one society; its articulation will involve the use of novel algorithmic techniques; and its application to concrete materials will require special training of high order. But above all, it will have to be a theory for which a method of evaluating evidence must be available which does not depend on the vagaries of special insights and private intuitions. It will have to be a theory which, in its method of articulating its concepts and evaluating its evidence, will be continuous with the theories of the natural sciences.' 'Problems of concept and theory formation in the social sciences', in *Science, Language, and Human Rights*. Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division, Volume 1 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1952), 43-63, at 63.

<sup>5</sup> In writing of Keynes's theories, R. F. Harrod characterizes economics in much these terms. *The Life of John Maynard Keynes* (Macmillan, London, 1951), 462-3.

<sup>6</sup> T. H. Marshall, 'A note on "status"', in K. M. Kapadia (editor), *Professor Ghurye Felicitation Volume* (Bombay: Popular Book Depot, n.d.), 11-19.

<sup>7</sup> R. K. Merton, P. L. Kendall, and G. G. Reader, editors, *The Student-Physician: Introductory Studies in the Sociology of Medical Education* (Cam-

bridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957).

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Barber has drawn out the implications of this structural fact in his study of voluntary associations; see his 'Participation and mass apathy in associations', in A. W. Gouldner, ed., *Studies in Leadership* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 477-504, especially at 486 ff.

<sup>9</sup> Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, rev. ed., in press), 336-56. This discussion of role-set draws upon one part of Chapter IX, 'Continuities in the Theory of Reference Groups and Social Structures', 368-84.

<sup>10</sup> See the observations by William G. Carr, the executive secretary of the National Education Association, who has summarized some of the conflicting pressures exerted upon school curricula by voluntary organizations, such as the American Legion, the Association for the United Nations, the National Safety Council, the Better Business Bureau, the American Federation of Labour, and the Daughters of the American Revolution. His summary may serve through concrete example to indicate the extent of competing expectations among those in the complex role-set of school superintendents and local school boards in as differentiated a society as our own. Sometimes, Mr. Carr reports, these voluntary organizations 'speak their collective opinions temperately, sometimes scurrilously, but always insistently. They organize contests, drives, collections, exhibits, special days, special weeks, and anniversaries that run all year long.

"They demand that the public schools give more attention to Little League baseball, first aid, mental hygiene, speech correction, Spanish in the first grade, military preparedness, international understanding, modern music, world history, American history, and local history, geography and home-making, Canada and South America, the Arabs and the Israeli, the Turks and the Greeks, Christopher Columbus and Leif Ericsson, Robert E. Lee and Woodrow Wilson, nutrition, care of the teeth, free enterprise, labour relations, cancer prevention, human relationships, atomic energy, the use of firearms, the Constitution, tobacco, temperance, kindness to animals, Esperanto, the 3 R's, the 3 C's and the 4 F's, use of the typewriter

and legible penmanship, moral values, physical fitness, ethical concepts, civil defence, religious literacy, thrift, law observance, consumer education, narcotics, mathematics, dramatics, physics, ceramics, and (that latest of all educational discoveries) phonics.

'Each of these groups is anxious to avoid overloading the curriculum. All any of them ask is that the non-essentials be dropped in order to get their material in. Most of them insist that they do not want a special course—they just want their ideas to permeate the entire daily programme. Every one of them proclaims a firm belief in local control of education and an apprehensive hatred of national control.

'Nevertheless, if their national organization programme in education is not adopted forthwith, many of them use the pressure of the press, the radiance of the radio, and all the props of propaganda to bypass their elected school board.' An address at the inauguration of Hollis Leland Caswell, Teachers College, Columbia University, November 21-2, 1955, 10.

<sup>11</sup> In this context, see the acute analysis of the formation of the National Union of Teachers by Asher Tropp, *The School Teachers* (London: Heinemann, 1957).

<sup>12</sup> See R. P. McKeon, R. K. Merton and W. Gellhorn, *Freedom to Read* (1957).