The Analysis of Social Situations
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THE ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL SITUATIONS*

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In the introduction to the Argonauts of the western Pacific Malinowski set out the essentials of his method of fieldwork. Out of this method, with its dual emphasis on the meticulously detailed recording of social behaviour and on empathic understanding, modern social anthropology developed. Before Malinowski published his work, ethnographies, with few exceptions, had consisted of somewhat haphazard collections of customs seldom set in their social context and often with an emphasis on the unusual and sometimes the bizarre. Malinowski argued that any social event had to be set in its social context and that the mundane had to be treated with as much thoroughness as the exceptional and the dramatic (1922: 11).

In addition to a long and intimate association with the people being studied and a thorough knowledge of their language, Malinowski stressed three aspects of his method which he saw as avenues leading to the final goal of empathic understanding. These were the detailed descriptions of the social organisation and culture of a people, documented as fully as possible by means of a variety of maps, charts, genealogies, village censuses, etc.; the recording of what he termed the imponderabilia of actual life, by which he meant essentially the detailed observation, and the documentation, of actual behaviour with all its subtlety of form and expression; and finally, the collection of texts of significant statements, invocations, magical formulae and the like, to form, as he put it, a corpus inscriptionum (1922: 17 sqq.).

Surveying the current range of methods and techniques of fieldwork, one might argue that whilst we have extended our methods of describing, and in many cases quantifying, the more tangible facts of culture and social organisation, and while we have little difficulty, given such modern aids as the portable tape recorder, in compiling, if we desire, an enormous corpus inscriptionum, we still debate, often with considerable vigour (cf. Paine 1967; Gluckman 1968a; Boissevain 1968: 553), how we are to record, analyse and present the imponderabilia of actual life—the ‘real stuff’ of the social fabric.

Much of this debate turns on how abstractions are to be made from the social situations which we observe.

I want to consider here one current issue, nay, a major controversy, though I fear I may end by offering no resolution of it. There are anthropologists who, on the one hand, abstract from situations in terms of enduring relationships, institutions, groups and organisations; against those who, on the other hand, adopt an actor-oriented perspective and abstract in terms of ego-centred networks of

relationships. Broadly, those who adopt the institutional approach lay stress on the enduring framework of institutions which constrains individual behaviour; while those who adopt an actor-oriented approach, lay stress on the flux and change of day-to-day life and give central importance to the individual who, as manipulator and innovator, creates, in varying degrees, the social world around him. Part of the debate centres on the extent to which irregularity and choice can be accommodated within structural analyses. But in large measure the debate arises from the two different levels of abstraction at which the various protagonists are operating. Working at low levels of abstraction one cannot but become involved in the flux and change of day-to-day life and there are processes and regularities which can be discerned at this level. However, large-scale processes and regularities on a greater time-scale, can, of necessity, only be handled at much higher levels of abstraction. The relation between the two levels of abstraction raises complex problems which have still not been satisfactorily solved, partly because, as one changes levels of abstraction, so there is corresponding change in the concepts that are used (cf. Schutz 1964: 68). After some preliminary discussion of social situations, I trace the emergence of the actor-oriented perspective; and I then finally consider Mitchell’s recent stimulating attempt to relate the different levels of abstraction at which network and institutional analyses are conducted. I note that I restrict myself to considering the development of the controversy largely within British social anthropology. Similar issues are being debated elsewhere and also within other disciplines (Schutz 1964: 68). I document my argument initially with data drawn from central and southern Africa, a region with which I have some familiarity.

As it has been generally defined in social anthropology, a social situation is a temporally and spatially bounded series of events abstracted by the observer from the on-going flow of social life (cf. Gluckman 1958; Devons & Gluckman 1964: 158 sqq.). I see some merit in the political scientist Riker’s view (1957: 61), that a situation can be defined as the initial and terminal points of some sequence of events when the flow of action is stopped to examine the interdependencies among events and actors, and I think there are occasions when we anthropologists use the term in this way, but I have not adopted this definition here. If we take an event to be some subjectively differentiated portion of motion and action (Riker 1957: 58), then a social situation comprises events both as perceived by the actors within it and the same events as perceived by the observer. The performance of a ritual, for example, may be a complex of events for both actors and observer in that it has initial and terminal points in time and a spatial location; but the social situation which the observer delimits for analysis may include other events which to the actors are simply contingencies and not part of the ritual as they define it. These may be regularly associated with its performance—whispered asides, such as, for example, between those officiating and the congregation about the correct ritual formulae. Or they may be events which regularly follow and precede the ritual, such as secular relationships between some of the actors involved in it. Or they may be haphazard events, such as a fight or quarrel among the participants. The situation as a unit of analysis, therefore, is defined by the observer. This is different from the treatment of situations by, for example, the symbolic interactionists (cf. Thomas
Kohn & Williams 1956: 164 f.n. 1; Goffman 1961; Waller 1965; McHugh 1969), where it is the actor's definition of the situation which is significant. However, when we refer to such processes as situational selection and examine how actors are defining situations, we are then treating situations in a similar way. When a situation is treated as a unit of analysis, the events contained within its temporal and spatial boundaries are arbitrarily and heuristically circumscribed (Devons & Gluckman 1964: 185 sqq.) in terms of some theoretical perspective. In Gluckman's treatment (1958) of the ceremonial opening of a bridge in Zululand, for example, the events which comprise the situation began some time before the actual ceremony and continued for some time afterwards, even though he includes only those which he observed. The spatial boundaries were extended to include the immediate environs of the bridge and the locations of the various participants. Present at the ceremony were Christian and Pagan Zulus, both royals and commoners, and European officials, missionaries and their guests; and Gluckman uses the situation to explore relationships between Africans and Europeans, and among Africans and among Europeans, in Zululand. With Mitchell's treatment of the Kalela dance (1956), on the other hand, it is the dance itself which constitutes the situation. Kalela is a dance which is regularly performed at weekends in the towns of the Copperbelt of Zambia by teams of dancers each largely drawn from one tribal group. As they shuffle around the arena the dancers sing songs which ridicule the members of other tribes, some of whom constitute the spectators. However, the songs are sung in the language of town and are phrased in an urban idiom. Noting this fact and the discrepancy between the smartness of dress of the dancers and their very lowly occupational status, Mitchell treats the situation as a vehicle for analysing the significance of tribe and class as categories for interaction on the Copperbelt. In his treatment of the situation he does not deal with the assembly of the dancers or with their dispersal, and the spatial boundaries of the situation extend only to include the dancing arena and the immediate spectators.

Some situations may be characterised by regularity of form as are the social dramas described by V. W. Turner (1957) for the Ndembu. Turner, after outlining the general form of Ndembu social organisation both qualitatively and quantitatively, then treats a number of situations which occurred within one village over a number of years in order to analyse certain processes. Crises occurred periodically within the village and exhibited certain regularities in the way in which they developed. The crises and the subsequent events Turner calls 'social dramas' and he shows how they proceed through regular phases.

Whilst some situations may exhibit a regularity of form in this kind of way, others may only exhibit regularities of behaviour among the actors involved in them and overall they may lack any general form.

The complexity of a situation varies directly with the extent of its temporal and spatial boundaries, the range of events, the number of actors involved, and the diversity of cultural forms—norms, values, symbols, artefacts etc., manifested or used in it. Furthermore, the extent to which various parts of the situation are simplified or examined in complexity will depend on the theoretical perspective of the analysis.

Social situations occur within a social space. The conceptualisation of this space, and the putting of boundaries around it, for purposes of study, raise crucial
problems (Gluckman 1964: 185 sqq.). In part, the problems relate to the extent to which actual events that are external to situations have to be taken into account in order to understand the behaviour of actors within them. In part, the problems relate to the practical issue of just how many, and what range of, events can be comprehended by a single observer given limited time and resources. In the past, social situations were conceptualised as occurring within some structurally defined social unit—a tribe or a society. But increasingly there has been a movement towards treating situations as part of a field (Gluckman 1958; 1961: 14) conceptualised as a continuum of relationships; and in more recent work this conception has been developed. Currently the social space has been conceptualised as a field of relationships, institutions, resources and events, which is heuristically bounded and from which events, assumed to have significant interconnexions, are abstracted to constitute a system for analysis. Epstein in his study of Politics in an urban African community (1958), conceptualised the situations which he analysed as occurring within an urban field of relationships which he partitioned into semi-autonomous sets or sub-fields. Turner (1968), in a recent analysis of the political aspects of an Ndembu ritual, treats the situation as located in a field in a more specific sense deriving from Lewin (1951: 200); and Swartz (1968) has developed this conception. From this perspective, a situation is viewed as occurring within a field setting whose circumference expands and contracts according to the changing interests and values of the actors in the situation. The field is defined in terms of the interests and involvements of the participants in the processes being studied and its contents include 'the values, meanings, resources and relationships employed by the participants in that process' (Swartz 1968: 9). Explicitly this orientation is directed towards the analysis of processes occurring within a field of interaction which may 'cross' institutional and organisational boundaries and which may persist when groups, organisations and institutions disappear or are modified. The essential attraction of the orientation is that it can be applied not only to the analysis of processes which have traditionally concerned anthropologists but also to the analysis of processes occurring within rapidly changing fields which orthodox forms of institutional analysis may have difficulty in treating. Essentially similar orientations have been used in studies of, for example, urbanisation (Mitchell 1966), labour migration (e.g. Gulliver 1957; Watson 1958; van Velsen 1960; P. Mayer 1961), the mobilisation of voters in an Indian election (A. C. Mayer 1966), political relationships among Bedouin (Peters 1967: 281), and ecological change in Indonesia (Geertz 1968: 10).

As Bateson (1958) demonstrated in his pioneering treatment of the Naven ritual among the Iatmul—a ritual which is performed by a man whenever his sister's child accomplishes some significant deed—any social situation displays many different dimensions and is amenable to analysis from different theoretical perspectives. This point has been more recently stressed and developed by Devons and Gluckman (1964). They have argued that the different social and behavioural sciences are 'in the main not distinguished by the events they study but by the kinds of relations between events which they seek to establish' (1964: 10). Psychologists, political scientists, economists and social anthropologists may each study the same events from different perspectives.

Which theoretical perspective is adopted will determine the dimensions of the
situation which are studied, the kinds and levels of abstraction made, and the nature of the explanation of the events. Any explanation of an event is only a partial explanation. Partial explanations made in terms of different theoretical perspectives may not always be compatible because the assumptions, explicit or implicit, which underly the perspectives may differ in fundamental ways. For example, the explanation of a situation, in terms of an institutional analysis which depends upon some concept of a typical actor as a performer of roles, where role is defined in terms of expected behaviour, may not be compatible with an explanation offered in terms of exchange theory or game theory, where the typical actor is conceived of as a manipulator and given a specified limit to his rationality, strategies, goals, and so forth (cf. Banck 1969).

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If we consider some of the changes which have occurred broadly within the institutional approach to the analysis of social situations over the last twenty years, we see that in fact the theoretical framework which has developed has acquired a considerable degree of flexibility.

Anthropology went through a phase, possibly a necessary phase, following the development of Radcliffe-Brown's theoretical orientation (Radcliffe-Brown 1952), with its emphasis on system, structure and interdependence of parts, when there was an emphasis on morphological abstraction and the construction of typologies. During this phase, analyses, particularly in the field of kinship, reached a high level of abstraction. Fortes could write, in 1953, reviewing the work of the previous two decades, that the structural frame of reference gave 'procedures of investigation and analysis by which a social system can be comprehended as a unity of parts and processes that are linked to one another by a limited number of principles of wide validity in homogeneous and relatively stable societies' (1953: 59).

At this level of abstraction we are dealing with a structure in which the types of actors are highly abstracted constructs conceptualised as the incumbents of positions or statuses, defined in terms of rights and duties, and the positions are further conceptualised as forming logically interdependent clusters. Processes are admitted, but, since the structure is synchronically derived they do not occur in real historical time, but in an abstract structural or processual time (Gluckman 1968b: 221; Garbett 1967: 122): lineages proceed through cycles of growth and segmentation, and they experience fission and fusion; villages are established, mature and disperse, but only as constructed types in an abstracted time. This mode of analysis was extremely fruitful for considering certain types of problem but, because it operated at such a high level of abstraction, assumed homogeneity, relative stability and functional interdependence, it could not be easily applied to the understanding of other kinds of processes occurring in historical time among actual individuals (van Velsen 1967: 143).

A number of attempts have been made to modify the conception of structure to make it more homomorphic to reality; notably by Firth (1954; 1955) with his conception of social organisation; by Gluckman (1958; 1961: 16); by Nadel (1957: 25 sqq.) who modified the definition of role; and by Leach (1954: 4, 285; 1961a; 1961b: 296 sqq.; 1962: 133). One of the most significant developments,
however, was a change in the actual method of abstracting from and analysing situations (cf. Barnes 1954; 1958; 1969a; 1969b; van Velsen 1960; 1964; 1967).

As familiarity with the main social forms grew, and as the societies which were studied became more heterogeneous as they underwent rapid social change, attention turned to examining the ways in which individuals interacted within a system. Researchers focused particularly on the means by which individuals attempt to resolve conflicting principles of organisation and to cope with discrepant values. It is also significant that this analytical development occurred, in the main, in central Africa where societies lack lineages and where the mobility of populations and the fluidity of groups is a marked feature. An important stimulus for the development of the method came from Evans-Pritchard's analyses of the situations of divination and death among the Azande (1937); and his later treatment of segmentary processes among the Nuer (1940: 261 sqq.). In these analyses he developed the principle of situational selection which has assumed considerable significance in much modern anthropology. Gluckman emphasised the significance of the principle in his treatment of African-European relationships in the Zululand of the thirties. Here, after describing the subtle shifts in alliances which occurred between Africans and Europeans in terms of temporary identity of interests, and among Africans and Europeans, from one situation to another, and within the same situation as it became redefined, he argued that: 'individuals . . . live coherent lives by situational selection from a medley of contradictory values, ill-assorted beliefs and varied interests and techniques' (1958: 26).

To understand more fully the processes by which discrepant values and conflicting principles were accommodated within a system and to show how individuals manipulated norms and values, the same actors had to be observed over a period in a number of different, but connected situations. This mode of analysis—situational analysis (van Velsen 1964: xxiii sqq.; 1967)—necessitated a radical change in the presentation of data since it required that a series of connected situations be set out extensively with the same set of actors appearing from one situation to another. Previously when situations had been presented, they were used either to provide, aptly, illustrations of the operation of abstracted structural principles, or, treated singly, extensively and synchronically, to provide a vehicle for understanding certain features of the wider social setting which were manifested in the situation (e.g. Fortes 1937: 131 sqq.; Gluckman 1958; Mitchell 1956). The development of the new method required, as Reader puts it (1964: 28), 'a high operator skill', and, in presentation, made heavy demands on the reader, but it had the advantage that much of the analysis could be checked (van Velsen 1967: 140).

In many of the analyses which have applied this method, there is a marked emphasis on individuals manipulating and intriguing to further their own interests. Turner, for example, writing of the period of apparent calm between one social drama and the next in the Ndembu village of Mukanza, states that 'beneath the surface conflicts of interest go on and private intrigues provide the means whereby individuals seek to realign the social structure in pursuit of their own advantage . . . In these intrigues the different principles of Ndembu social organisation are manipulated by the major intriguers to further their own ends' (1957: 131). Van Velsen perhaps goes further in his analysis of the extremely fluid organisation of the Lake-side Tonga of Malawi, among whom there are no permanently structured
groups but each individual is involved in a wide network of relationships. He demonstrates how actual genealogical relationships have little meaning in the abstract, but are manipulated in relation to particular interests and situations as individuals switch their allegiance among the small impermanent groups which form on the basis of ad hoc loyalties. From his analysis emerges the conception that relationships 'are more instrumental in the activities of people than they are determinants of them' (van Velsen 1964: 8).

We see developing, therefore, a method and theoretical orientation, stemming from the main stream of structural analysis, which focuses on sets of interacting individuals exercising choices through time and defining situations in terms of the various values, motives and interests governing their behaviour. The actors are real historical individuals but, as the incumbents of positions and performers of roles, their actions are seen as being constrained by, and occurring within, a fixed normative framework derived by means of a synchronic analysis (van Velsen 1967: 149). Although a number of situations are presented diachronically, the structural framework is fixed; past events are interpreted in terms of present norms. Of necessity, therefore, the method still has difficulty in accommodating endogenously generated changes in norms and values. Gluckman (1968b) has argued that for short periods of time in rapidly changing societies, or for longer periods of time in relatively stable societies, these procedures are justified. I have also argued that the method might be strengthened by conducting restudies at significant points in time (Garbett 1967: 119). However, those who adopt an actor-oriented perspective appear to be arguing that the notion of a synchronically derived, and therefore fixed, structural framework within which actions occur should be abandoned or modified. There seem to be only three methods of doing this: either 1) by resorting to straight historical description; or 2) by using restudies; or 3) by constructing 'generative models' which, as it were, simulate process in real time, and in which norms, values, etc., are seen as emergent from the processes of interaction, but are granted some degree of autonomy. Barth and others are experimenting with such models (Barth 1966).

The actor-oriented perspective has been developed particularly by those anthropologists who have become involved in the study of complex societies and of rapidly changing societies where, rather than simply describe events, they have sought to develop new theoretical orientations and new modes of analysing situations. Attention has come to be focused on actor-oriented perspectives in part because, in complex situations where an overarching institutional framework is absent or difficult to construct, it has been found more convenient to proceed from the social individual (Reader 1964: 28), and, in part, because the incorporation into these perspectives of concepts from game theory and exchange theory, with their emphasis on manipulation and strategy, largely necessitates such an approach. One such approach which has been applied with some success to the analysis of social situations and which tackles problems similar to those treated by the established method of situational analysis, utilises the concept of social network.

Since Barnes’s first introduction of the concept in 1954 it has been applied in a number of different contexts and in somewhat different ways. Broadly one can distinguish between those who lay stress on the morphological aspects of ego-centred networks and those who lay stress on their instrumental, transactional
aspects. Bott (1957), for example, in her now classic study of urban families, concentrated on the morphological aspects of the networks of the urban couples she studied. She related the degree of segregation of conjugal roles to the degree of connectedness—or density—in the joint networks of the spouses. Whilst she gave some attention to the instrumental aspect of relationships, she laid particular emphasis, in her explanation of the connexion between role segregation and density, on the high degree of normative consensus which she assumed to exist in dense networks. Others (e.g. C. Turner 1967; Udry & Hall 1965) who have followed her approach and attempted to test her hypothesis have similarly concentrated on morphology.

In political contexts, however, the concept of network has been applied somewhat differently. Here, although the morphological characteristics of ego-centred networks still have significance, much more attention is given to instrumental, transactional relationships. A pioneering study here was A. C. Mayer’s treatment (1966) of a municipal election at Dewas. Mayer describes how quite long chains of social relationships, each relationship of which is distinct in terms of normative and interactional content, stretch from the candidate to the voter. He demonstrates how the candidate is able to initiate action among some of those with whom he has direct relationship which, through a series of separate transactions, ultimately results in some service or aid being bartered with a remote voter, at the end of a chain of relationships, in return for political support.

Mayer’s use of the concept of network also marks another significant change in its application. When Barnes originally introduced the concept, he partitioned what he termed the total network—conceptualised as a continuum of all relationships within a community—into three fields or sets of relationships: the industrial, the territorial, and what might be termed the personal, based on relationships involving kin, friends and acquaintances. From this third field, Barnes identified personal sets or networks which, since they were based to a large extent on choice, were likely to be different for each ego. Bott, in her study of families (1957), concentrated on these personal sets, or ego-centred networks. However, Mayer’s ego-centred action sets include not only kin, friends and acquaintances but also individuals who are members of a wide variety of political, religious and economic groups and organisations. Others have adopted a similar approach and Barnes has recently remarked that the ‘non-institutional’ field which he originally distinguished may be a redundant category (Barnes 1968: 123). The extension of the concept of an ego-centred network, or set, to include not only kin, friends and acquaintances but also individuals who have roles in permanent groups and organisations, has considerable significance. It marks a distinction between those who, like Bott (1957), Befu (1963), and Boissevain (1968), conceptualise an ego-centred network as lying at one end of some kind of continuum with corporate groups at the other, and those who conceptualise it as being a construct at a low level of abstraction, consisting of all relationships among some set of individuals who, at a higher level of abstraction, can be treated as persons occupying positions in groups and organisations of varying degrees of permanence.

Mitchell (1969), developing an argument originally advanced by Srinivas and Béteille (1964), has recently discussed in some detail the relationship between abstraction from situations in terms of institutions and abstraction in terms of
networks. Here I summarise a complex argument somewhat baldly. Mitchell repeats first of all his and Epstein’s (1962) well-known division of social relationships into three different orders or types of social relationships: the structural, ‘by means of which the behaviour of people is interpreted in terms of the actions appropriate to the positions they occupy in an ordered set of positions . . . ’; the categorical, ‘by means of which the behaviour of people may be interpreted in terms of social stereotypes . . . ’; and the personal, ‘by means of which the behaviour of people in either structured or unstructured situations may be interpreted in terms of the personal links individuals have with a set of people and the links these people in turn have among themselves and with others . . . ’ (Mitchell 1969: 9). He then stresses that these different orders of social relationships do not represent three different types of actual behaviour, but they are simply ‘three different ways of abstracting from the same actual behaviour to achieve different types of understanding and explanation’. In terms of this argument, therefore, network analyses and institutional analyses are not opposed but are ‘two different ways of abstracting from the same empirical data’. To abstract institutions, one begins by observing actors interacting in a variety of situations at different times and locations and notes the meanings which they impute to their actions and to the relationships in which they are involved. Many relationships will be multiplex and some will ramify across the community being studied. By observing an actor in different situations as he interacts with others and noting the behaviour and meanings associated with these interactions, one is able, by an act of abstraction, to differentiate the separate normative contents or strands of multiplex relationships. If one conceptualises the ramifying set of relationships within a community as constituting in Barnes’s sense a total network—then a set of relationships with a single specified content abstracted from this network constitutes a partial network (Barnes 1968: 111). By comparing relationships within a partial network based on a specified content such as kinship, in different locations and situations, one is able to formulate roles and role sets and to state the ‘relatively enduring relationships which represent the structure of relationships among kin and the set of systematised norms that constitute the institution of kinship’ (Mitchell 1969: 45). Institutional analysis thus proceeds to abstract from actual behaviour to multiplex relationships, then to partial networks in terms of some specified content, then to roles and norms, and finally to institutional structures.

By contrast, in a network analysis of a situation, Mitchell argues (1969: 47), one accepts the inherent multiplexity of relationships and, by taking each individual in turn as a focus, maps his relationships, both direct and indirect, with other individuals in the situation and external to it. One then seeks for regularities in the ways in which the behaviour of an individual is affected by the configurations of relationships among other individuals both within the situation and external to it. One can then proceed, if one wishes, to abstract partial networks, then to abstract groups, organisational structures and institutions, but there is a difference between this procedure and that used in institutional analysis. By mapping actual networks of relationships, one can examine the extent to which behaviour which occurs in terms of one normative framework is related to that which occurs in terms of another framework. With institutional analysis, on the other hand, the mode of abstraction tends to minimise the connexions between institutions, and it is difficult
therefore to establish the extent of their interdependence. Abstractions from actual networks, however, enable the extent of the interdependence of institutions to be established empirically (Mitchell 1969: 49).

The actual systematic mapping of social relationships in the way in which Mitchell advocates raises formidable problems which he himself acknowledges (1969: 30). Clearly, the only satisfactory way in which the various normative and interactional contents can be derived is by participant observation. The wealth of detail produced by the mappings of relationships—which in the past would have been difficult to treat—can now be formally analysed because of recent improvements in techniques, such as the introductions of matrix methods and methods derived from the theory of topological graphs (Flament 1963; Harary et al., 1965; Garbett 1968; Barnes 1969). However, the very nature of this intensive mode of analysis tends to restrict its application to relatively small-scale situations. Other methods have to be adopted, as with situational analysis, to derive the structure of the fields in which the situations are set.

Mitchell’s treatment of the two modes of abstracting from situations is an extremely interesting one but it still leaves open the actual connexion between the processes occurring at the level of interacting individuals and processes occurring at higher levels. Or, if we use his terms, it leaves open the question of how the expectations arising among pairs of actors, which are used at the level of the partial network to abstract norms and formulate roles and role-sets, actually affect and are affected by the interaction and behaviour of individuals. Social anthropology has, in the main, treated one part of this equation and examined how individual behaviour is constrained by the framework of norms and values. Recently attention has turned to considering the other part of the equation: how individual interaction produces changes in norms and values. This has involved a radical reorientation in theoretical perspectives and it is still too early to say how successful the new approaches will be. Much of the work in progress on these problems relies heavily on concepts, propositions and assumptions derived from axiomatic theories such as game theory and the various exchange theories. The application of axiomatic theories raises considerable problems. Whereas, in the main, anthropologists have worked with a conception of typical actors acting within typical situations constructed by a process of abstraction from the observation of the behaviour of individuals in a variety of situations, the typical actor used by those applying axiomatic theories is an artifically constructed type given only the degree of rationality, foresight, information, history, motives, choices and strategies which the particular theory permits (Schutz 1964: 82). This restricts the range of application of these new modes of analysis largely to the analysis of economic and political relationships. Their success depends upon the extent to which the behaviour imputed to the constructed type of actor approximates to the behaviour of typical actors in the situations being analysed (cf. Schutz 1964: 83).

Barth (1966) was among the first to experiment with these new approaches and he applies a theory of exchange which derives in part from Homans (1958; 1961); cf. Stebbins 1969) allied to concepts derived from game theory. He conceives of actors rationally engaging in transactions in which they attempt to ensure that the value gained is greater than, or equal to, the value lost; and he has applied this theoretical orientation in an attempt to show how changes in the values and forms of
organisation may be generated. Apart from the whole question of reductionism, a number of weaknesses are apparent in the theoretical orientation which Barth and his colleagues have adopted when it is considered in its own terms. Transactions are viewed as occurring among actors involved in a game of strategy which is essentially zero-sum—that is, one actor or set of actors gains what the others lose. In real life very few situations are in fact zero-sum and most involve individuals who have some common and some conflicting interests—i.e. they are ‘mixed game’ situations (cf. Schelling 1960: 83 sqq.). There is also a tendency to concentrate on the objects being transacted and their changing values to actors, rather than on how the relationship between any pair of actors is affected by a series of transactions. Finally, there is little attempt to consider systematically the multiple strategies of all actors within a situation to see how one actor’s strategy is dependent upon and constrained by the strategies of others. Or to consider how strategies, pursued by one actor in one situation in terms of one set of interests, affect, and are affected by, strategies pursued in other situations in terms of different interests. In part, this stems from a tendency to focus upon some actor who is conceptualised as being linked to another actor by a dyadic contract (Foster 1961). Apart from the compounding of diverse relationships, best kept discrete, into the one category, this leads to a concentration on the transactions of some actor with those actors with whom he has direct relationships to the neglect of those transactions occurring among those actors themselves. Or, more simply expressed in terms of the technical language which Barnes (1968: 112 sqq.) has developed, there is a concentration on transactions occurring within ego’s primary star to the neglect of transactions occurring among actors within his primary zone.

Kapferer in a recent study (1969) of African workers in part of a processing plant in a mine in Kabwe (Broken Hill), Zambia, has attempted to avoid some of these difficulties. He applies concepts derived from Blau’s theory of exchange (1964), which is perhaps the most developed of the theories of this type currently available. In this theory, actors are assumed to make rational choices but on the basis of restricted information and limited perception. Although they act to satisfy their self-interest, in order to do this they must to some extent satisfy the self-interest of others. The exchanges which occur among actors are seldom in balance; and balance in one set of relationships is conceptualised as producing imbalances (Blau 1964: 214) in other sets or at other levels. In the process of interaction and exchange, properties are held to emerge which are independent of the properties of individual actors and which influence their future courses of action. The stress on emergent properties in the theory is an attempt to avoid the reductionism which is explicit in Homans’s theory of exchange.

One of the problems which arise with any theory of exchange, whatever its degree of sophistication, is how to operationalise it (Cancioin 1968: 232). Kapferer (1969) did this by utilising the concept of network to map the various exchanges occurring among workers. From his observation of the face-to-face interactions among the workers he abstracted five sets of relationships in terms of their exchange content. These were: conversation, joking behaviour, job assistance, personal service and cash assistance. He then analysed the relationships falling into each category by matrix methods and made inferences about the ‘strength’ of each worker’s relationship with all those with whom he came into direct contact,
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according to the number and type of exchange contents in each relationship, instrumental contents—such as the giving of money—being given more weight than associational contents—such as conversation. Taking each worker in turn as a focus of a set of relationships, he computed a number of structural measures and used these to assess the extent to which workers were differentially tied into the situation and the extent of their social investments in each other. Applying propositions derived from Blau, and using structural measures to assess the strategies open to each worker, Kapferer then analysed a dispute between two workers involving allegations of rate-busting and counter allegations of witchcraft. He attempted to explain why the two workers in particular became involved in dispute, why the dispute, though potentially serious, was in fact kept at a trivial level by other workers, and why, during the mobilisation of support, one of the disputants became isolated. Whilst in his explanation Kapferer gave some attention to the general norms and values invoked by workers in the situation, he lays particular stress on the specific norms and expectations, seen as emergent from the processes of exchange and interaction, between particular pairs of workers. His explanation of events rested on the assumption that ‘persons will align themselves in a dispute in such a way as to incur the least loss to their investments in the total set of relationships in the situation’ (Kapferer 1969: 243).

This attempt to use the concept of network in conjunction with a theory of exchange to analyse a particular situation is an interesting one. It seems to me to indicate the kind of detailed mapping of relationships and plotting of strategies necessary if one is to adopt a rigorous actor-oriented approach. Of necessity, however, the techniques and method used limit its application to small-scale situations. Thus, unless one wants to treat situations as simply another kind of ‘small-group’ (Bales 1951; Homans 1961: 7 and passim) in an extra-laboratory setting for the testing of propositions derived from exchange theory, one’s findings have to be related to, and set in, a wider context presumably studied by other methods.

Whether or not Blau’s concept of emergence—which, whilst its significance is stressed, remains undeveloped in his book—actually provides the link between individual interaction and norms, values and institutions, is debatable. Initially it has some attraction. Thus, for example, when two individuals begin to interact, the relationship which develops between them has properties which are distinct from the properties of either of the individuals. Similarly, when a coalition is formed, it acquires properties (leadership, a division of labour, and so forth), which are not the properties of individuals. These emergent properties may then acquire a degree of autonomy and persistence which enables them to constrain and influence the future behaviour of individuals. The difficulties really begin when one begins to consider the problem of levels of emergence. Is it possible to argue that properties which emerge at one level can be related to other properties emergent at the same level to constitute a system which itself has properties emergent at a higher level? It may be that various levels of abstraction through which, as Mitchell has outlined, we proceed to derive institutions, could be reinterpreted in terms of levels of emergence. But this is a problem I leave to the philosophers.

When I began to work out this lecture I hoped to resolve the conflict between anthropologists focusing on institutions and those focusing on ego-centred interaction. I found that I could not do so. It may be my own weakness; or it may be
that the subject is not yet ripe for a reconciliation. It may be even that no reconciliation is possible; and that this is a problem for philosophers and not for a field anthropologist.

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