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# Social Division of Labor, Construction of Centers and Institutional Dynamics

## A Reassessment of the Structural-Evolutionary Perspective

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### I

A central concept in the classical structural evolutionary theory is that of „differentiation“ of cultural and social differentiation and evolution. It was this dimension that was strongly emphasized by the various evolutionary theories – from the classical ones leading to the more recent Version expounded by Talcott Parsons and some of his followers in the sixties and seventies – and it has come under strong attack from many quarters.<sup>11</sup>

There is no doubt that in its original version – which stressed the unilineal development of all societies on a universal evolutionary scale and the conflation between the differentiation of all institutional arenas and between the structural-organizational and symbolic dimensions of social interaction – this evolutionary perspective is not tenable.

But all these criticisms notwithstanding, the evolutionary perspective has a strong kernel of truth in it: namely, the recognition of the propensity of human action to continuous expansion and to the decoupling of the different components or dimensions of social action from the frameworks within which they are embedded and from one another.

Processes of differentiation may be seen as a very important dimension of such a tendency to expansion. The core of such processes of differentiation is the decoupling of „formerly“ mutually embedded activities. Such differentiation may

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1 T. Parsons, *The Evolution of Societies*, edited and with an introduction by Jackson Toby, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall 1977.

develop with respect to both the structural and symbolic dimensions of social interaction and structure.<sup>22</sup>

On the structural level, the major process of such „decoupling“ has been that of *structural* differentiation, i. e. of the crystallization of specific, organizationally distinct roles – such as for instance an occupational one as against their being firmly embedded in, for instance, different family or local settings, and of the concomitant development of new integrative mechanisms. On the symbolic level, the process of such decoupling is manifest above all in the disembedding of the major cultural-orientations from one another – i. e., the decoupling of such orientations and the growing autonomy of the different components of codes. Such decoupling is usually connected with a growing problematicization of the conception of ontological and social reality, and with an increasing orientation to some reality beyond the given one and with growing reflexivity and second order thinking. Some of the most important illustrations of such decoupling can be seen in the transition from immanent to transcendental orientations, or in the structuring of collectivities and models of legitimation of regimes, from primordial to civil and transcendental ones.

Contrary, however, to the presuppositions of classical evolutionary and structural-functional analyses, different dimensions of structural differentiation and disembedding of cultural orientations and a growing problematicization of the perceptions of the sources of human existence do not always go together and our reappraisal of the structural-evolutionary perspective on the development of human society stems from the recognition of this fact.

Of central importance in such a reappraisal, based on the recognition of the fact that the differentiation of different dimensions of social action and cultural orientations need not, do not always go together in the development of human society, is the distinction between, on the one hand, social division of labor which contains the core of structural differentiation and on the other hand what has been called the basic elite functions – those functions or activities which are oriented to the problems generated by the very Constitution of social division of labor. These problems generated by the construction of the social division of labor – rooted in the very ubiquity of the social division of labor – have been identified by the Founding Fathers of Sociology – especially Marx, Durkheim and Weber – as the most important dimensions of the Constitution of social order. The Founding Fathers stressed that the very construction of the social division of labor (of the „market“ in modern societies) generates uncertainties with respect to each of several basic dimensions of social order, i. e., with respect to trust, regulation of power, construction of meaning

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2 For a recent reappraisal of the concept of differentiation, see J. Alexander and P. Colony (eds.), *Social Differentiations*, Beverly Hills: Sage Publications 1989.

and legitimation. Because of this, they claimed that no concrete social division of labor and no concrete social order can be maintained without these dimensions or problems being taken care of. Therefore, all of these sociologists emphasized that the construction and „production“ of any continuous patterns of social interaction are based on the development of some combination of the organizational structure of the division of labor with the construction of trust, regulation of power and the legitimation of the different patterns of social interaction.

In other words, it is these problems – of the regulation of power, the construction of trust and solidarity and legitimation and meaning that designate the conditions, which have as it were, to be „taken care of“ – in order to ensure the continuity of any pattern of social interaction, i. e., of relatively continuous boundaries of such interaction. It is these problems which define the systemic tendencies and sensitivities, the „needs“ or prerequisites of such continuous interaction, and which have been strongly emphasized by the „structural-functional“ school of sociology. However, contrary to the usual interpretation of the structural-functional approach, the concrete specification of such needs and prerequisites is not given by some „internal“ features of these systems, i. e., by the level of technological development or of structural differentiation, but is effected by specific social processes, in which the construction of meaning plays a central role.<sup>33</sup> The social activities oriented to these problems can be defined as elite functions and are indeed distinct from those engendered by the social division of labor.

This distinction has, however, not been fully recognized in the relevant literature and it is the examination of this distinction and its implications for sociological analysis that constitutes the starting point, or the reappraisal, of structural-evolutionary perspective which will be presented here.

## II

This reappraisal will be based above all on some of the research in comparative macro-sociology which I have undertaken in the last three decades – starting with the analysis of the Political Systems of Empires.

In the work on Empires, I identified the locus of the elite activities in centers of societies or sectors thereof – a concept coined by Edward Shils which he then combined with the reanalysis of the concept of charisma.<sup>44</sup> I first examined the

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3 See S. N. Eisenstadt, „Functional Analysis in Anthropology and Sociology,“ *Annual Review of Anthropology* (1990).

4 E. Shils, „Center and Periphery; Charisma: Order and Status,“ in: *ibid.*, *Center and Periphery* respectively, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1975, pp. 3-17 and pp.

analytical dimensions of the concept of center and center-periphery relations and applied them in comparative analysis in the Introduction to the 1969 paperback edition of the *Political Systems of Empires*.<sup>55</sup> This analysis emphasized the importance of center and center-periphery relations as a distinct analytical dimension of the institutional format of centralized empires – in principle, of any society. It emphasized that this dimension is not subsumed under the scope of structural differentiation of the social division of labor.

In this analysis, the center or centers of a society were conceived as dealing not only with the organizational aspects of the social division of labor; they were also seen as primarily dealing with the connection of these aspects of the social division of labor to the charismatic dimensions of social order. That is to say, the centers of society were connected to the attempts to relate the mundane realities of social life, of institutional formations to what is conceived by humans as the source of existence, of life and its predicaments.

But centers themselves differ between societies and are not necessarily homogeneous in any single society. In general, the differences between the respective centers of such regimes were analyzed in terms of their structural and symbolic autonomy, their distinctiveness, the types of their activities, their relationship to the periphery, and their capacity for change.

In general, empires have been characterized by a relatively high degree of distinctiveness and autonomy of their centers and by the attempts by the centers to permeate periphery, and by the more limited impingement of the periphery on the center. It is such distinctiveness of centers that distinguishes empires such as Rome, Byzantium and many of the Muslim empires and the absolutist states of Europe from the more patrimonial empires like Egypt or the Inca and Aztec ones.

It has been shown that these various components of centers do not always go together even in the Empires, and each component may be articulated within different centers to different degrees, giving rise to different modes of control by the ruling elites. These differences, in turn, are closely related to the nature of the elite coalitions that predominate in a given center and society and to the cultural orientations they articulate. As a result, different centers and societies exhibit diverse structures and dynamics.

The analysis of different types of centers, the first steps of which were undertaken in the introduction to the paperback edition of *Political Systems of Empires*, was developed further in the introductions to the various sectors of the reader on

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256-276.

5 S. N. Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires* (paperback edition), New York: The Free Press 1969.

*Political Sociology*<sup>66</sup>, which I edited. Here, the distinctive characteristics of centers and center-periphery relations are described – in different types of regimes, tribal societies, city-states, or patrimonial regimes and the like. The differences between the respective centers of such regimes are analyzed in terms of their structural and symbolic autonomy, their distinctiveness, their types of activities, their relationship to the periphery, and their capacity for change.

### III

The most important analytical concept connecting the structure of centers and the broader social structure is indeed, as mentioned above, the distinction between structural differentiation of division of labor and that of elite functions. Here the crucial difference lies in the distinction between, on the one hand, the degree of congruence of tasks in the social division of labor and, on the other, elite functions, that is the regulation of power, the construction of trust and solidarity, and provision of meaningful models of cultural order.

These implications of the recognition of distinct aspects of social order that go far beyond the division of labor defined in terms of structural differentiation and its evolutionary perspective have been further developed in several studies undertaken in the framework of the program on comparative civilization of the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, and the Truman Research Institute of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.<sup>77</sup> Among these studies were those of the so-called Axial civilizations as well as a series of comparative macrosociological studies, especially the study of the origins of the state with special reference to Africa, edited by me with Michel Abitbol and N. Chazan.<sup>88</sup> In these studies we attempted to examine systematically the relations between social division of labor and structural differentiation and other dimensions of social order, especially the construction of trust, solidary collectivities, regulation of power, meaning, and legitimation. We have analyzed the cultural dimension of social order as it is interwoven into social structures; the roles of different types of social actors, especially coalition of elites; and processes of conflict and change.

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6 S. N. Eisenstadt (ed.), *Political Sociology*, New York: Basic Books 1970.

7 S. N. Eisenstadt, *A Sociological Approach to Comparative Civilizations: The Development and Directions of a Research Program*, Jerusalem: The Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, Dept. of Sociology and Social Anthropology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem 1986.

8 S. N. Eisenstadt, Michel Abitbol and Naomi Chazan (eds.), *The Early State in African Perspective: Culture, Power and Division of Labor*, Leiden: R. J. Brill 1987.

The central point of the study of the early state was the distinction between several types of centers – especially between organizational and the „model-based“ centers and their close relation to what we have called congruent and noncongruent societies.

„Organizational centers,“ to be found in Africa among, for instance, the Asante, the inhabitants of the city-state of Ibadan, the Kongo, the Zulus in the days of Shaka, and the Bambahra, were structurally much more elaborate and powerful than the units at the periphery but, symbolically, were not distinct from the periphery. In other words, they did not articulate symbolic models of the cultural order or of solidarity that were different from those current in the major units of the periphery.

Attendant on growing social differentiation, the crystallization and restructuring of these centers were based on the reorganization and consolidation of family, kinship and territorial structures. The state center became articulated through the ordering of broader primordial criteria – especially those of family, kinship and territory – and, at times, through the actual redefinition of kin and territorial bases. In these cases, there was almost no Separation between religious and cultural, or political and economic, centers. Symbolic meaning, regulatory trust, and expansionist power functions overlapped.

The structure of these centers tended to be relatively consistent with the degree of structural differentiation in a society, giving rise to the development of collectivities based on a diffuse symbolic identity. Within these societies there did not develop centers with a high degree of distinction between structural differentiation and the structuration of elite functions. The symbolic dependence of the periphery on the center was thus kept to a minimum, while its instrumental dependence became more pronounced.

The central element of the coalitions in these societies consisted of the various leaders of ascriptive units who articulated the solidarity of their respective groups and consequently performed other, especially political (or military), elite functions. They evinced only a small degree of specialization and were, for the most part, firmly entrenched within the same broadened kinship and territorial units. Power and authority and, to some degree, wealth, were to a large extent mutually interchangeable.

By contrast, whatever the extent of their organizational differentiation these developed „model-based centers“ promulgating new visions of strong and compact social order (among the Yoruba, Kangaba, Kong Buganda and in many Islamic societies in Africa), were characterized by a much greater degree of symbolic differentiation from the periphery than were organizational centers. In model-based centers some or even most elite functions were organized distinctively. Consequently, state centers with different structures and emphases emerged.

In these cases, the development of centers and different elite functions did not occur through reconstruction of primordial familial, kinship, or territorial groups on a larger and more differentiated symbolic and territorial scale. Rather, they arose primarily through the disengagement of some or most elite functions from the scope of such groups and through the crystallization of centers defined in relatively autonomous ways, that is, according to criteria and modes of mobilization and structuring distinct from those of the periphery. Within these centers there developed, at a relatively early stage, distinct articulation of models of cultural order.

In model-based centers, the articulator of models of cultural order („cultural elites“) tended to be organized in various distinct associational, kinship, and territorial settings. In these circumstances, power and authority were not easily interchangeable, nor was task specialization or wealth accumulation readily convertible into the symbolic functions linked to center consolidation. Consequently, as role differentiation increased, so did the interdependence of separate elites and, above all, of the periphery and the center. The periphery's dependence is evident in its high degree of Subordination to the center's charismatic institutions.

#### IV

Such variations in the structure of the centers and in institutional dynamics are found in societies at similar stages of structural differentiation. Thus, such variability cannot be explained adequately by conventional differentiation theory, with its evolutionary implications. The clue to understanding such differences resides, as hinted above, in the different elites – the „visions“ they articulate, the coalitions they enter into, and their relation to other groups or strata in the society, especially their autonomy as against their inclusion or embedment in broader ascriptive units or, in other words, the extent of distinction between social division of labor and differentiation of elite functions. Only through this distinction is it possible to account more fully for the different paths of political dynamics in general, and the diverse patterns of state formation and of different types of centers in particular.

With regard to this relation between organizational specialization and the articulation of elite functions, two distinct patterns, those of congruent and non-congruent societies, can be identified in historical Africa. These patterns are closely related to the distinction between the different types of centers analyzed above.

The first pattern encompasses societies in which there was relative congruence between specialization of the social division of labor and articulation of elite functions. The second consists of societies in which a dissociation or noncongruence between elite functions and the organizational differentiation of society prevailed.

Good illustrations of the first type with many variations can be found among the Asanta, the Kongo states, the Zulu, and the Ibadan Yoruba, and in a different mode among the Bambahra, that is, in societies in which organizational centers developed. In all these societies the basic elite functions corresponded to the principle of structural differentiation, and the articulation of elite functions was deeply embedded in existing social structures and in the social division of labor.

In stark contrast, in other African societies (like the Ife, Kong, Buganda and many of the Islamic societies) such as these developed different patterns of noncongruence between the articulators of elite functions and the organizational differentiation of society and it was in these societies that model-based centers developed.

## V

The distinction between structural differentiation and the differentiation of elite functions helps to solve some of the problems for which the classical evolutionary approach is inadequate. It shows that different constellations of center types and activities are closely related to both the patterns of elite coalitions pre-dominating in the centers and to the characteristics of their major elites. The major distinction here is the degree to which the elites are autonomous or embedded in ascriptive units, or act as representatives of such units in the society. It is the extent and direction of the autonomy of elites and influentials that constituted one of the most important tools for the analysis of the institutional dynamics of different societies.

The elites' relative autonomy is closely related to different cultural or civilizational visions and cultural programmes, to the premises of the cultural and social order promulgated by them and is often challenged by different groups and counter-elites. These premises shape center patterns and institutional dynamics. Of special importance here is the distinction between perceptions of low as against high degrees of tension or clues in between the transcendental and the mundane, and between direct or mediated access to the sacred.

Such different cosmological or ontological views are promulgated by different elites and influentials, and there exists an elective affinity between these visions and the degree of autonomy of elites, between embedded as against autonomous elites. In most congruent societies in which embedded elites predominate, the prevalent cultural orientations were characterized by a very low degree of tension between the transcendental and the mundane, whereas in most noncongruent societies the modal perception is of a very high degree of tension.

In these latter societies, the separation of the center from the organization of tasks in the social division of labor led to the differentiation of elite functions and the consequent development of various institutionalized charismatic visions. This



differentiation and development constituted the nuclei of a variety of center activities. The range of possible coalitions that could develop in these circumstances was great. In most centers, however, relatively autonomous articulators of models of social and cultural order were dominant in the ruling coalitions.

Finally, the factors just mentioned are closely related to the ability of various centers to generate and sustain different types of change. Thus, model-based centers attempt to transform the existing social order, whereas organizational centers mainly regulate existing social relations.

## VI

The Axial Age civilizations provide an unusually instructive arena for the examination of both the difference between structural differentiation and the differentiation of elite activities – as well as of the variety of possible elite coalitions bearing different cultural visions or orientations. They facilitate an analysis of the impact of these elite coalitions and counter-coalitions on the institutional structure of their respective societies, on the *modes* of structural differentiation, and on the dynamics of these societies. Above all, the analysis of the Axial civilizations provides an arena for a most fruitful analysis of the relations between cultural, civilizational visions and institutional formations; for an analysis of the interweaving of cultural and social structural dimensions in the construction of such formations.<sup>99</sup>

The term „Axial Age civilization“ (coined by Karl Jaspers) refers to those („great“) civilizations that emerged in ancient Israel, in a variety of Christian settings, in ancient Greece, partially in Zoroastrian Iran, in China during the early imperial period, in Hindu and Buddhist South and Southeast Asia, and much later, beyond the Axial Age proper, in the Muslim world. These civilizations were characterized by the development and institutionalization of basic conceptions of tension and by a chasm between the transcendental and mundane Orders.

These basic conceptions developed initially among small groups of „intellectuals“ (who constituted, at the time, a new social element), and were closely related to various autonomous elites in general and to carriers of models of cultural and social order in particular. Ultimately, these conceptions were institutionalized in all of the Axial Age civilizations and became the predominant orientations of both the ruling and many secondary elites. These cultural visions were also fully

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9 See S. N. Eisenstadt (ed.), *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Civilizations*, Albany, New York: SUNY Press 1986. Also, S.N. Eisenstadt (ed.), *Kulturen der Achsenzeit*, 2 Teil (3 vols.), Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1991. And also, S. N. Eisenstadt, *Civiltà Comparata*, Napoli: Liguori Editore 1990.

institutionalized in their respective centers or subcenters. Such institutionalization made the intellectuals or cultural elites relatively autonomous partners in the central coalitions. Diverse clusters of autonomous intellectuals were transformed into more fully crystallized and institutionalized groups, especially groups of a clerical nature as exemplified by the Jewish prophets and priests, the great Greek philosophers, the Chinese literati, the Hindu Brahmins, the Buddhist Sangha, or the Islamic *'ulama*. At the same time, the political elites were also transformed. It was these autonomous elites that constituted the crucial new element in the institutionalization of these civilizations.

From our analytic perspective, the most central aspect of the Axial Age civilizations was that they exhibited, even if in different ways, the basic characteristics of noncongruent societies: they were characterized by a sharp distinction between differentiation in the social division of labor and the articulation of elite functions.

In this regard they differed from the other „congruent“ types of more „developed“ or archaic societies that developed in many ancient patrimonial societies: ancient Egypt, which is probably the best illustration; city-states such as those of ancient Phoenicia; and various other decentralized tribal federations. In such congruent societies the transition from one stage of political development to another (e. g., from early state to archaic kingdom) has usually been connected with the reconstruction and widening of the kinship and/or territorial elements and ascriptive categories and symbols, with the growing importance of territorial units as opposed to purely kinship ones, and with what may be called the qualitative extension and diversification of basic cosmological conceptions. It was also characterized by the increasing specialization of elites (who were, however, on the whole, embedded in various – and even very complex and wide-ranging – ascriptive units), by a close correspondence between structural differentiation and the differentiation of elite functions, and by the prevalence of cultural models and conceptions containing relatively low levels of tension between the transcendental and mundane Orders.

The mode of social differentiation that developed in these congruent societies featured the crystallization of centers that were ecologically and organizationally, but not symbolically, distinct from the periphery. Such patrimonial centers crystallized around elites who were enmeshed in various types of ascriptive units, often broad and reconstructed ones, and who carried cultural orientations characterized by a relatively low degree of tension between the cosmic and the mundane Orders.

In contrast, the Axial Age civilizations were marked by growing distinctions, even discrepancies, between the structural differentiation of the social division of labor and the differentiation of elite functions. In addition, these societies witnessed the emergence of autonomous elites and concomitantly more radical developments or breakthroughs in cultural orientations, especially in the direction of the radical

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