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Uses of Information: When Social Information Becomes Desired

By ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

ABSTRACT: Most post-Weberian concepts of social system (of organization, bureaucracy, and the like), having been inspired by organic analogy, choose "survival of the system as such" as the analytical frame of reference and conclude that any system "is interested" in absorbing all information available. Systems, however, are dynamic configurations of competing forces and their need for information should not be taken for granted, for it is always selective and submitted to power considerations. One of the tasks of social information is to study and to obtain conditions which make the system open to the kind of information necessary to promote socio-economic growth.

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The chief books he has written are Class, Movement, Elite (1960); An Outline of Sociology (1962); An Outline of Marxist Theory of Society (1964); and Culture and Society (1966). All are published by the Polish Scientific Editors, Warsaw. The books are also available in Czech, Slovak, Serbo-Croatian, and Hungarian translations. French (Anthropos, Paris), and English (The Manchester University Press) editions are now in preparation.

THE identifying quality of the part of reality called "system" lies in its relatively high "regularity": inside this part, certain events are more probable than others, whereas certain other events are almost unthinkable or can occur only in rare circumstances.

Living organisms provide the natural source of inspiration for the idea of "systemness" in its commonest version. Indeed, these are little "islands of order," as Warren Weaver put it, in a basically disorderly world. They alone, "by their very nature," manage to maintain a continuous pattern of interrelationship between their parts and, by the same token, they have the incredible ability to give a handful of chosen events a stable preponderance over hosts of others. Whatever its historical merits, the organic analogy has limitations laid bare recently by the penetrating analyses of Walter Buckley.¹ To the innate pro-stability and anti-flexibility bias of organic analogy, so lucidly unveiled by Buckley, one has to add, however, its over-emphasis on the "wholesomeness" of the systemic structure and function. Indeed, while looking on a living organism, one cannot conjecture any reason whatsoever for the parts performing their routinized activities except the survival of the whole as such. Speaking of "interests" of parts other than maintaining the whole in its viable shape would amount to senseless metaphysics. The consequences for the idea of a social system are far-reaching. Just how far-reaching they are, we can easily see by running over varied but somehow strikingly similar models of ordered wholes, appearing under the names of systems, organizations, bureaucracies, and stemming from the common Weberian root.

Enjoying the luxury of detached and

unemotional study of non-human phenomena, we happily refrain from an anthropomorphic temptation which is much less resistible when the subject is human and thus easily accessible to sympathetic understanding. In the human case, we are far too often lured into conjectures of "goals," "drives," and "interests" hidden behind the apparent regularity of behavioral patterns. Thus, we are inclined to speak of the "interest of the society" or of a group, and sometimes even of "societal" or "group" "aims." These aims and interests we ascribe, according to the rules of the organic analogy, to the social system as a whole. What was justifiable as the only available analytical frame of reference, in the case of biology, has turned, in its sociological incarnation, into a quasi-empirical theory of what actually is the social reality. What can remain just functional in the realm of biology turns inevitably into teleological when applied to the world of social and cultural events.

THE ORGANIC ANALOGY

The rest of the tacit or manifest assumptions of this most influential among current theories of social systems follows almost automatically from the original sin of the notion of a pre-ordained systemic goal. The environment is viewed solely as a potential feeding ground, to be rummaged in search of prey in competition with other carnivores. In a fairly representative and convincing concept of the system's environment by H. A. Simon,² the system's "aspirations are fixed," the only element of the increased complexity of the analytical scheme being introduced by passing from a "single goal" organism to a "two or more goals" system—

1. Cf. Walter Buckley, *Sociology and Modern Systems Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1967).

2. H. A. Simon, "Rational Choice and the Structure of the Environment," *Psychological Review* (1959).

all the multiple goals given at the same starting point of the time process. And the assertion that "if all its needs are satisfied, it (the organism) simply becomes inactive" thus constitutes one of the three basic assumptions of the analytical scheme. Providing these assumptions have been accepted, it is only logical to conclude that the crucial factor in the system's successful activity—unambiguously achieving pre-ordained goals—is the degree of its orientation in the environmental structure. This orientation, in its turn, depends on to what extent the environment is "satiated" with organized, regular, predictable information, and to what extent this information is available to the organism (through properly tuned senses and storage capacity). Thus, from the system's point of view, the availability of information is unequivocally beneficial; the more information available, the better. Since the system "is interested" in its own survival, it is *eo ipso* "interested" in absorbing all achievable and relevant information.

Now, information is a measure of the "uncertainty" of a situation. The uncomfortable and adaptively negative environmental disorder can be, as far as the system is concerned, disposed of in two apparently different ways. The system can accumulate and process a sufficient amount of information to compensate for vicissitudes of disorientation caused by the environmental disarray; this is the "subjective" elimination of disorder, requiring in the first run an appropriate extension of the system's input and storage implements. Or the system can dominate its environment to the point at which some undesirable happenings will be forcibly eliminated. In this case, the environment becomes "objectively" less irregular, which means that it can be dealt with in a routine manner, with no constant inflow of fresh and reliable information necessary.

Thus, the more information, the better. But we have just seen that to substantiate this conclusion, one has to accept unreservedly a series of assumptions so commonly taken for granted that they are rarely, if ever, put to any serious test:

- (a) every system is "interested" in its own survival;
- (b) survival means keeping its present structure unchanged;
- (c) constancy of the structure which should be defended for the sake of survival foreordains a limited sum of constant "consummative" (final) goals;
- (d) constancy of the final goals provides the needed frame of reference for determining the most beneficial shape of system-environment equilibrium;
- (e) the only thing needed to achieve this equilibrium is to increase the information supply, and thus the control over the environment by the system.

Now, this is an ideal typical system, and we do not usually expect such a type to be an exact description of actual phenomena. On the contrary, according to some opinions, the very value of ideal types consists in their providing a measuring rod to establish the actual degree of deviation of empirical phenomena from theoretical standards. It is, however, rarely denied that the less the empirical phenomena deviate from the ideal type, the better our theoretical model is. If they do deviate, do it clearly, and seldom do anything else, the heuristic value of our "ideal type" becomes more than doubtful. The more we encounter organizations rejecting or suppressing available information; and (what is even more important) the more we come across organizations which, in the course of their history, modify the patterns of their activities to the extent strongly suggestive of a deep,

underlying change in aims, the more we suspect that there is something basically wrong in our assumptions. Indeed, the above ideal type does not provide any reasonable explanation for the tendencies which, according to its basic premises, can be defined only as suicidal.

THE DYNAMIC MODEL

To find exactly what is wrong with the "structure-preserving" model, we shall examine its most fundamental premises. In the *pars destruens* of our task we can use the guidance of George C. Homans, who pointed to the facts—obvious, once stated—that

Social life is never wholly utilitarian: it elaborates itself, complicates itself, beyond the demands of the original situation. . . . Society does not just survive; in surviving, it creates conditions that, under favourable circumstances, allow it to survive at a new level. Given half a chance, it pulls itself up by its own bootstraps.³

It follows that the only constant element in a social system is its flexibility and changeability—all the rest, including the notorious "structural patterns," are variable and manipulable products of its life process. To use the modern cybernetic terminology, we can say that the social system is an "ergodic" system, a system whose actual states are not dependent on and so not derivable from its initial inputs. Its progress in relation to living organisms consists in its being able to survive in multiple structures. However, once this level of progress has been achieved, further existence is possible only so long as the structural patterns retain their flexibility. Thus, change, the defense against which is, according to the first model, the substance of the system's

survival, in the second model turns into the fundamental condition—as a matter of fact, into the meaning—of the system's existence. Any social system, if viable, produces unceasingly new structures, functions, and goals. The actual system can move and does move indeed far away from the tasks it was initially called upon to perform. And the point is that it is a perfectly "natural" and "healthy" process which hardly can be described as a deviation from the one and only appropriate model.

This far we come with Homans. Unfortunately, this exceptionally original thinker stops short of discovering the implications his approach bears on informative relations between systems and their environments, and the role the information itself plays in bringing about the results depicted theoretically in his model. It seems as if, in further elaborations of his theory,⁴ Homans misses the unique chance of bringing together his analytical assumptions with the most advanced, though unexplored, approaches of modern information theory, and retreats into safer though much less stimulating theses of traditional "exchange theories." As a matter of fact, he steps back as far as the worn-out shibboleth of "economic man." The inherent flexibility of human organizations is derived from the tensions which evolve around differentiated bargaining positions. These bargaining positions are in turn defined by means of access to sought-for rewards. We are again in the "pre-cybernetical" epoch of a purely energetical image of social reality. Information is not singled out as a very particular kind of "reward" and the access to the sources of information is not

3. George C. Homans, *The Human Group* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1950), pp. 61, 272.

4. Cf. *Social Behavior, Its Elementary Forms* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961); G. C. Homans, "Fundamental Social Processes," in Neil J. Smelser, ed., *Sociology, an Introduction* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1967), pp. 27-73.

called on to play a peculiarly operative role within organizations in the Homans vision of the system as a shifting, dynamic balance of forces pursuing their own aims. The ghost of the "system's interests" and "aspirations" has been fortuitously banished.

If not the missing link itself, at any rate the clue necessary to find it is provided by W. Ross Ashby's remark that "when a whole system is composed of a number of subsystems, the one that tends to dominate is the one that is *least* stable, the one that is nearest to instability. . . . The one nearest to instability rules."⁵ It is an entirely fresh look at the traditional concept of "bargaining position" and at the goods sought for in the power struggle. The concept of information finally enters the kingdom of organization theory, heretofore reserved for biological analogies or the "economic man" model. It stems from the very idea of a system, that items belong to one system if, and only if, they communicate, that is, if any item is not irrelevant to the state of the others or if the state of every item can be presented in principle as a function of the others. It follows that "being an element of a system" means being dependent on the states of other elements: among variables defining every state of any element X_i , the states of elements $X_a, X_b, \dots X_n$ play at least a prominent role. When applied to social systems, the above statement means that each member of a system, organization, or group is restricted in his freedom of choice and maneuver by the behavior and power of other members. The Ashby comment relates to the question of just how far these restrictions go and what the conditions of their effectivity are. To these questions Ashby's answer

is different from Homans': The power of influencing the other members' behavior by a given member X_i depends on his "instability"—that is, on the range of states he can assume: the less restricted a member is by himself, the more he restricts the others. Indeed, if my decision depends on the attitude which would be taken by somebody (X) and by his subsequent response, the less predictable, "regular," and so manageable his reactions are, the more I feel myself—and indeed I am, even if I do not feel it—tied by his will and whims.

These ideas were developed at length in one of the most original among current theories of organizations—this by Michel Crozier.⁶ Crozier rightly condemns the Weberian-Parsonian models of organized systems for their utter neglect of the power issue. In fact, any human organization (which constitutes, as we remember, a sum of limitations imposed on an otherwise chaotic realm) is a system of power relations. Its essence consists in some people being able to influence (control) the behavior of others, being in their turn influenced and controlled directly or indirectly by the decisions which are or can be taken by those others. To many a member of an organization, the extent of his power so understood is a value in itself; to most of the members, the extent of their power is the focal instrumental factor, as it exerts decisive influence on the access to all goods which are and can be distributed in and by the organization.

The instrumentality of power is embodied in the phenomenon of the "bargaining position," which every member of an organization, were he acting "rationally," would try to achieve or to defend. This position is measured by the extent to which other members

5. W. Ross Ashby, "The Application of Cybernetics to Psychiatry," in Alfred G. Smith, ed., *Communication and Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), p. 376.

6. Michel Crozier, *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

should, were they also acting rationally, take into account his intended actions while planning their own behavior. If my response cannot change substantially the intended after-effects of the others' action, my bargaining position is weak. I enjoy a strong bargaining position if my responses cannot be predicted in full by the others: unable to predict "the objective necessity," the others must seek other ways to make the uncertainty of my behavior manageable. One way is submission; another, appropriately heightened reward. The bargaining position is thus closely linked to predictability of behavior—in other words, to the distribution of information.

ORGANIZATIONAL WARFARE AND ITS STRATEGY

The power structure of an organization is best represented by a mobile hierarchy of the bargaining positions and tensions, strategies and alliances developed around it. This hierarchy can be, in its turn, depicted as a graph representing the flow of information, with its independent sources and vocational specifications. A visitor entering an office building with no previous knowledge can estimate crudely the relative importance of its inmates by comparing the size of steel safes they have access to.

If this is so, then the most rational strategy for each member of an organization in his own power struggle is to limit the others' freedom of maneuver and to keep his own as large and unrestricted as possible. Each one is "objectively interested" in a minute regimentation, by most precise and unambiguous rules, of the future behavior of every other. Simultaneously, each stubbornly resists any attempt to impose similar rules on himself. If the rules are sufficiently exact and specific, the responses of every person submitted to

them can be easily predicted by everyone adequately acquainted with the rules; at the same moment, these responses cease to represent a "field of instability" and offer to their bearers a very meager bargaining position indeed. On the contrary, if the rules imposed by the organizational authorities are vague and liberal, it remains for the person in question to decide what possible way of acting will be chosen. The "field of instability" remains ample and the bargaining position is correspondingly high.

In most complex organizations there are certain "natural" limitations to artificial regulations. These are set by the specialized knowledge and skill of experts, who do not share with the others their peculiar ability to handle certain significant technical issues. Their relatively unique expertness defines a sphere of autonomy which cannot be encroached on by the nonspecialists' decrees, providing the tasks set for the organization do not undergo substantial changes. It can, however, be narrowed or even nullified if only one of the sides involved in the power struggle is prepared and able to sacrifice certain manifest goals of the organization for the sake of its power position. Thus, the natural limits to the fight against subjective uncertainty, and so for increment of personal power, create a constant source of tension between declared organizational tasks and power interests. Much of the widespread phenomena of flexibility and continuous metamorphoses of organizational goals becomes explicable if these tensions are taken into account.

Expertness is a matter of degree, and so are the limits imposed on artificial, statutory regulations. There is hardly any position in an average organization which can be considered as entirely expertless. Thus, every member retains, or in any case has an opportunity to

retain, some personal realm of instability on which a bargaining position, however frail, can be founded. The instability—uncertainty and unpredictability for others, autonomy for oneself—based on expertness is an analytical type rather than a box in an unequivocal classification of the organization's members. The other type in an analytical continuum is autonomy based on authority, i.e., on access to and control over statutory positive and negative sanctions. There is seldom a personal union between the two foundations of bargaining power. The analytical distinction between sources of uncertainty crystallizes empirically into a power conflict between two, sometimes more, objectively and subjectively separated groups. But all kinds of combinations between the two are practically possible; and a majority of power positions contains both ingredients in variable proportions. What is, however, the most important aspect for our theme is the fact that the two foundations of organizational power are "objectively" in conflict, each one interested in undermining and overcoming the other. In a small, simplified way we can say that "the experts" are interested in a minimum of regulation and a maximum of "natural" distribution of power (the more so, the more "expertness" one possesses and the more crucial is the role played by the field of his expertness in the mix of organizational functions); whereas "the rulers" are interested in a maximum of regulation imposed on the others' behavior and in leaving to themselves the right to make exceptions and to decide when the rule is to be applied and when it can be suspended.

It follows immediately that the assumption that every increase in relevant information is unequivocally "welcomed" by "the organization" is far from being as axiom-like as it seemed to be to the adherents of the "classic" theory of or-

ganization. First of all, the notion of "the point of view" of an organization as such becomes meaningless. Even at the crudest stage of our analysis we are forced to distinguish at least two incompatible points of view. Secondly, as each inflow of information is unequally distributed inside the organizational power structure, it affects the established balance of forces and so inspires differentiated responses and actions. There is hardly a neutral information input. There is, on the contrary, a high level of probability that any increment of information will arouse hostile reactions in some parts of the organization and so—to be assimilated—will have to overcome some tangible resistance. Information welcome to some will probably be unwelcome to others and the rulers, if unrestrained by other considerations, will tend to cut off the uncontrolled channels of communication altogether. Thirdly, control over input and processing of information is the most powerful armament in the intra-organizational power struggle. It can hardly be expected that it will be submitted to technical considerations only. It depends on the type of organizational function and on the place occupied by the organization inside the wider power web, whether the power considerations will finally get the upper hand in their struggle with technical preferences. The possibility is always there.

The genius of Kafka forecast just what this possibility could mean and he did it well in advance of sociologists. The nightmare of "K." in *The Trial* consists not in physical suffering, not even in fear of severe and painful punishment, but in a total lack of knowledge of the intentions of the other side. Indeed, the opponent is sinister exactly because unpredictable. The lofty puissance of "The Castle" is based on the total ignorance on the part of the others, and certainly of outsiders like "K." as

to what its next moves are going to be. Until submitted to intelligibly articulated rules, The Castle remains invincible. Anybody hoping to play with The Castle a game based on reciprocal predictions will do better if he gives up in time his vain pretensions to control a field of whose structure he has no information whatsoever. A monopolistic access to information concerning some field makes the monopolist invulnerable, at least in the limits of the field in question.

STRATEGIC PRINCIPLES INSTITUTIONALIZED

Oscar Lange defined in 1962⁷ a "totally centralized organization" as a system in which all decisions are taken solely by the highest executive organ of the system: information concerning the situation of the system flows only from the bottom upward, while the commands descend from the top downward. In other words, there is no information-processing and decision-taking in the organizational links lower than the top executives. It follows that in a centralized system the supreme organ knows everything, the others know nothing. The top organ does not just predict, but manipulates and shapes the future, while lower organs have no rule whatsoever over their own behavior. Their total submission to superior command makes their behavior totally predictable, while every single factor determining their situation depends on the supreme will, whose intentions cannot be envisioned with a reliable degree of certainty. As far as the group at the top is concerned, that is the ideal state.

There are two alternative systems to a totally centralized one. Technically, they may be taken mistakenly as belonging to the same class; sociologically,

they are set as far from each other as can be imagined. The first alternative is an automatized system. Here the lower links are allowed to make decisions by themselves to process available information without sending it to the center. However, hard rules are imposed by the top executive which force each subsystem to reach automatically only such decisions as would have been taken by the top were the executive to bother itself with the task. The lower links are only apparently free; as a matter of fact, their range of maneuver is nullified by tough indicators prescribing exactly what action should be taken. Sociologically, the situation is hardly different from that of a totally centralized system. Only the top executive sets the rules and only he can change them. The executive may, however, prefer an automatized system over a centralized one. Technically, it saves the inconvenience of exaggerated capacity of the information channels and allows for shortening the time span between input and output of information, which in some cases may be vital for the system. Sociologically, it permits the executive to make the lower links responsible for any failure in implementing the declared organizational goals. The trouble consists, however, in the difficulty of translating multidimensional goals set for the system into single-dimensional indicators. Even slight flaws in the translation process can result in far-reaching side effects. This possibility introduces an inevitable element of uncertainty into the situation of the top group. That is why the latter concedes to quasi-decentralizing concessions reluctantly, and only if pressed heavily by a too conspicuous inefficiency in the centralized order. Nevertheless, both centralized and automatized systems belong to the same category, called by John Hicks—in application to the economy—"command systems," characterized by complete

7. Oscar Lange, "Some issues of centralization and decentralization in management," *Papers in Praxeology*, Warsaw, April 1962.

"aboveness" in both direct and indirect decisions.⁸

A real alternative to the command system in its two forms is provided by a decentralized system: a system in which the lower links of the organization are given not only the freedom but also the necessity of decision. Their activity is ordered by the center indirectly—"parametrically," according to the expression used by Janusz G. Zeliński.⁹ The center settles for manipulating the factors that are environmental from the point of view of subsystems: in the case of the economy, factors like prices, credit, mortgage rent, and the like. It is left to the subsystems to make the best possible use of the "terms of trade." The nonparametrical factors (direct instructions by the center) remain constant, are unchangeable. As far as subsystems are concerned, there is no uncertainty "above"; the whole attention can be and indeed is turned to informative assimilation of the environment. The lower links are relatively safe as regards the top. The top is heavily restricted in its opportunities to manipulate the destinies of lower links. In other words, the real intraorganizational power resides at the bottom of the systemic pyramid. It is these lower links who are "the nearest to instability"—and who rule.

The centralization/decentralization struggle is a struggle for power. The experts are "close to instability," and so the least vulnerable and the most powerful, when the system puts to the forefront the tasks of technical improvement and innovation. The technical information is manageable by experts alone and, when given priority, bestows on the ex-

perts the crucial and decisive role in the power system. It appears as if the technical information were looked for and absorbed by the system as a whole; as a matter of fact, however, it is digested by certain peculiar systemic links only, and, by the very logic of differential digestion, introduces substantive changes into the web of power relations. The change would be an irretrievable and irreversible process only if the tasks of the system were fixed, as was assumed by the classical tradition. But the tasks are not fixed, and there are circumstances in which the system would retreat from the formally declared goals rather than allow the intruders to capture attractive and desirable positions of power. "The rulers," by the very logic of their systemic function, are least interested in technical information. The information they do look for and accumulate greedily is of a different kind: the type usually kept in secret dossiers, and concerned with facts which—in due circumstances—can influence heavily the destiny of other people, usually experts. Thus, both sides are interested in absorbing information. But the type of information they are interested in is cut to their measure; it is the type they and they only can digest and process, thus strengthening their own bargaining and power position in the system. Given absolute freedom of maneuver, each side will impress on the system its kind of information alone and suppress entirely the alternative kind.

It follows that there are no "absorbing" and "rejecting" systems in the absolute meaning of the words. An absolutely information-rejecting system would be a dead one. Still, absorption of information is always selective. The above is by no means a revolutionary statement. What is much less platitudinal, however, is understanding that in the "systemic goals/selectiveness in information absorbing" paradigm, the

8. John Hicks, *A Theory of Economic History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 21.

9. Janusz G. Zeliński, "Centralization and Decentralization of Decision," *Economic Life*, 10, Warsaw, 1963.

cause-and-effect relationship is not necessarily unidirectional. The systemic goals are usually among its most flexible attributes.

Technical innovation and experiment are the vested interest of the experts. They become a superior goal of the system as a whole only in circumstances when the rulers can maintain their rule only by doing things which cannot be done without experts. Even then, the rulers will accede only reluctantly and will resist the inflow of technical information to the best of their ability—if the chain reaction, once set in motion, can yet be stopped. In the Eastern European political framework, in which access to the means of influence is the single important instrumental good—placed strategically at the crossroads of the ways leading to almost all other socially available goods—power considerations play an unusually active role in determining the systems' structure and function. It is frequently said that the emergence of a centralized, power-centered system was caused by conditions of scarcity, in which few accessible means had to be allocated to many equally significant goals. One wonders to what extent the opposite is true. Meager output push "the rulers" closest to instability: distribution orders dominate over consumer choices. It is only natural that the rulers are deeply interested in maintaining this situation as long as possible. Out of this need an extremely ingenious means was invented of combining a relatively high rate of the global growth of output with the least possible contact with consumers: a heavy investment ratio, allocated almost entirely in developing production of investment goods. A closed circle was thus created, remaining entirely in the field dominated directly and monopolistically by the rulers and free of instability introduced by whimsical consumer demands. Had the system en-

joyed forever the Stalinist unity of leadership and wisely followed Stalin's commandment of perfect isolation, the arrangement could easily have become "immortal." The struggle for leadership, however, forced the rulers to bring into the game the very variables they tried to avoid while united: "the people's will," their support and their discontent. It appeared, then, that apart from the function of defending the rule of the party, factories have other tasks to fulfill—for example, to supply the market with consumable goods. In the course of satiating the market, the consumer's taste began to play an ever-increasing role. This placed in the strategically focal position those types of information which are called on to cope with exactly this kind of environmental instability: information required to improve technological processes, to perfect the quality of products, and the like—in short, information locating the experts "closest to instability." There were, of course, other factors working in the same direction.

The thesis of two separate "world markets"—not interfering with each other and devoid of common points—being the very last of Stalin's theoretical contributions, amounted to his testament for the Soviet political system. For these or other reasons it was not, however, honored by his heirs. And so for the first time what was heretofore unilaterally determined by rulers' planning encountered the new kind of instability inherent in competitive conditions. The impact was very pronounced in the case of consumer goods. But it was stronger still in the case of military output, where the technical quality of products, checked by factors beyond power control, imposes its own priority over all other possible systemic considerations. Being allocated in the field of utmost certainty, the military experts easily enforce their autonomy over the rest of

the political system. Even this danger Stalin intuitively succeeded in avoiding, by endangering the very existence of the Soviet state rather than allowing the military to climb the power ladder in the lift of modernization of the army's equipment and strategy.

CONDITIONS TO ABSORB INFORMATION

All these remarks are entirely relevant to the socio-political systems of the "Third World." At least in one case—that of systems called aptly by Peter Worsley "one-party states"¹⁰—they are more than simply relevant. According to S. E. Finer,¹¹ states of this sort emerge most readily in societies simple enough in their structure to be run by coarse and unsophisticated methods of military or semimilitary administration. There are, however, reasons to suspect that, whatever its initial conditions, the system in which "the party is largely what it claims to be—the country," in which "party and society merge,"¹² turns eventually into a decisive device defending a highly complicated social structure. In this structure—as happened in former French Africa—a military policeman gets in cash in six weeks what a peasant gains during thirty-six-and-a-half years of drudgery. Here the resistance of rulers to give experts more rope is magnified, for the prize at stake is much more precious and brittle and the lack of any competitive pressures typical in a pluralistic society permits the rulers to rule without relying in too many fields on independent experts. This supplies one more, and a very significant, explanation for the notorious organized waste of ostentatious elitarian consumption and prestigious status-seeking construction: this type of "de-

velopment" does not lead to any real test in which the experts' skill becomes necessary.

However, the more a country progresses along the way of industrial development, the more the foci of "uncertainty" move toward expert management of economic and social problems; and the need for scientifically checked, reliable and up-to-date information becomes more pronounced, to turn eventually into a real "functional prerequisite" of the system at its present stage of growth. "After all," says Professor Richard Stone of Cambridge,¹³ "an economy is nothing but a system which transforms information into decisions; so a necessary condition for its efficient functioning is that an adequate amount of information be available in the right place at the right time. A market mechanism does not automatically generate this information."¹⁴ So specialized bodies are necessary to make up for the natural shortcomings of spontaneous mechanisms. This is exactly the thing discussed in this volume—institutionalized "social information." It is exactly on the level of relatively advanced socio-economic development when critical remarks like this of W. Arthur Lewis:

One of the main deficiencies of underdeveloped countries is their failure to spend adequately upon research, and upon the development of new processes and materials appropriate to their circumstances.¹⁴

become not only justified but also practical, for the structural ground has been prepared to make their implementation plausible.

Just what kind of information becomes needed to get the growth through, is dealt with in other contributions to

10. Peter Worsley, *The Third World* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1967).

11. S. E. Finer, *The Man on Horseback* (London: Pall Mall, 1962).

12. Worsley, op. cit., p. 197.

13. In Nigel Calder, ed., "Computer Models of the Economy," *The World in 1984*, Vol. II (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 55.

14. W. Arthur Lewis, *Theory of Economic Growth* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1963), p. 55.

this volume. One is tempted to stress, however, that—apart from more or less “economic” information, like estimates of the quantities of resources available and manageable which are discussed most frequently and profusely in standard and specilized texts—the information which is as urgently required as it is hopelessly overlooked concerns the socio-cultural and psychological processes. It is enough to look through enormous literature devoted to the multifarious cultural, social, and psychical barriers to change, to be convinced of the strategic importance of relevant

social information. Social scientists become crucial figures whenever socio-economic development becomes a desirable and achievable end of a social system. Since, however, “the nature of leadership patterns in a community is one of the most important of all factors influencing cultural change,”¹⁵ a deep and comprehensive insight into the society’s power structure constitutes a prerequisite and the focal point of the social scientist’s informational duties.

15. George M. Foster, *Traditional Cultures and the Impact of Technological Change* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 110.