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Politics and Engineers

Ladd and Lipset, in the article "Politics of academic natural scientists and engineers" (9 June, p. 1091) argue that two factors give engineers a conservative viewpoint: the practical orientation of engineering and the close link existing between engineering and the business corporation. However the first factor simply reflects the nature of engineering and does not cause conservatism. Although Ladd and Lipset point out that, within other cultures, engineers can become radicals, their argument leads the reader to associate conservatism with a practical orientation.

The model on which modern engineering schools were founded, the Ecole Polytechnique, formed a hotbed of radical thought and mothered a technocratic philosophy. In the hands of those who possess radical ends, engineering becomes radical; in the hands of the conservative, it becomes conservative. American engineering, because it lives only for all practical purposes within the business corporation, has adopted the values of the corporate enterprise and has therefore a conservative orientation.

Robert M. McKeon
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McKeon is quite right that a given discipline may manifest sharply divergent political orientations in different societies. Lipset and I noted that in the contemporary United States the social sciences are the most left-of-center, critical, and change-demanding disciplines. In the Soviet Union, by contrast, political dissidence and critical activity appear more pronounced among faculty and students in the natural sciences. It is not scholars in social science, but Andrei Sakharov, Andrei Tverdokhlebov, and Valery Chalidze, three prominent physicists, who founded the Committee for Human Rights, an organization which is devoted to strengthening legal norms and essential civil liberties. As the more politically relevant fields, the social sciences are particularly hampered by ideological control.

We do not agree, however, that the relative conservatism of academic engineers in the United States is totally unrelated to the intellectual nature of their subject matter. The link between intellectual creativity and proclivity for a critical politics, so often discussed, has been shown by our analyses of survey data on faculty opinion to be exceptionally strong. When a field places greater emphasis upon originality, creativity, and the application of standards involving the ideal or theoretical, with reference to its subject matter, it appears to encourage a general conceptual approach which is carried over to other areas, including orientations toward the social system.

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material flows and social relations is reciprocal. A specific social relation may constrain a given movement of goods, but a specific transaction suggests a particular social relation (pp. 186–87).

so that "if friends make gifts, gifts make friends." The first and second rules are then applied to an analysis of forms of reciprocity from "general" ("putatively altruistic," p. 193) through "balanced" ("striking of equivalence," p. 220) to "negative" ("something for nothing with impunity," p. 195). Generalized reciprocity sustains the interdependence of the group (whether domestic or political) by laying a diffuse obligation on recipients (p. 194). It also serves as a starting mechanism of rank distinction and . . . as a mediator of relations between persons of different communities" (p. 219).

Balanced reciprocity, which might strike us as being identical with market exchange, is seen rather as "the classic vehicle of peace and alliance contracts, substance-as-symbol of the transformation from separate to harmonious interests" (p. 220). The equivalence, while often (not always) having utilitarian consequences, is more important as a renunciation of self-interest and hostility between groups otherwise subject to no higher authority.

From this interpretation of reciprocal exchange there follows a schema to account for the short-run stability of rates of exchange between goods in balanced reciprocity and the longer-run variability in these rates (in response to what Sahlin calls "supply and demand"). It is not competition among bidders for the increasingly scarce good (or better offers by suppliers of the increasingly plentiful good) that is the market mechanism that changes prices but the need in intergroup transactions to be generous to avoid "a translation from trading goods to trading blows" (p. 302); and such untoward events, argues Sahlin, are likely to occur if one of the trading partners comes to feel that the other is putting considerably less effort into providing gifts than he himself is. Generosity—which is to say, fear of the consequences of perceived singleness—creates "equilibrium" without the competition of alternative sources of supply and without alternative outlets for the supplier.

The entire argument is buttressed (not, as Sahlin recognizes, proven) by evidence from a wide variety of cultures, and the evidence is in turn explained by his rules, postulates, and corollaries.

Sahlins's book is in spirit (and substance) representative of the substantive as opposed to the formalist school in economic anthropology. (The formalists hold that economic theory provides good explanations of economic activity everywhere, the substantivists that one should tell it like it is—but then this reviewer is a substantivist.) Sahlins's ingenious schema "equating supply and demand" does not constitute evidence that production in Stone Age economies responds to relative costs and productivities of inputs. In economic theory the "laws of supply and demand" are rubrics for feedback mechanisms which lead to a general equilibrium of all prices and quantities, of all inputs as well as all outputs. As Sahlin uses "supply"—and as do many anthropologists—the term refers to some quantity which happens to be around. It does not, as it does in economic theory, refer to the processes of costing and choosing alternative outputs by which the quantity around is determined, but appears to be independent of price.

Sahlins's phrasings and references may arouse the ire of, or at least put off, non-Marxist readers, and this would be unfortunate. His Marxism appears to be totally unnecessary to his argument: I have, I think correctly, summarized his argument without his Marxism ("superstructures" in the passage quoted above could as easily have been "structures," "institutions," or even "substructures"). The book provides numerous similar phrasings and several extended references to Marx, all of which appear to be deletable without loss. (Why are citations of Marx, or Marshall, necessary to social sciences? Science publishes reports on moon rocks and Mars pictures without mentioning Brahe or Kepler.)

Actually, Sahlin's arguments are not Marxist but 20th-century and operational. For instance, he has an appealingly straightforward interpretation of the much disputed hau (Ranapiri) passage in Mauss's The Gift. In the passage A gives B a gift, B gives that gift to C, C gives a reciprocal gift to B, and B feels obligated to give that reciprocal gift to A because it is the hau of A's original gift. Sahlin argues that the hau of an article (or jungle) in Maoriland is neither "unconscious necessity" (Lévi-Strauss) nor magic (Johansen) but simply "return on," "product of," or even one could add, "consequence of" (pp. 149–62). It is curious that Sahlin goes on to say that when Mauss asks "What is there in the thing that makes the beneficiary reciprocate?" and Marx asks "What is in these things [a quarter of corn and X hundredweight of iron], so obviously different, that yet is equal?" the two "share the supreme merit . . . of taking exchange as it is historically presented" (pp. 180–81). Sahlins's interpretation is certainly taking exchange as it is historically presented, but Mauss's and Marx's concepts of something "in the things" are unhistorical and metaphysical.

Last, one notes the absence of any mention of Pearson's "The Economy Has No Surplus" (in K. Polanyi, C. M. Arensberg, and H. W. Pearson, Eds., Trade and Market in the Early Empires, Free Press, 1957), which presented Sahlins's first rule about "economic intensification" in a book which Sahlins cites elsewhere. Why? Because Pearson's phrasing of the same point was anti-Marxist?

No matter, Stone Age Economics, while not a survey of the economic anthropology, is as of now the most sophisticated, extensive presentation of, and argument in and about, the field.

WALTER C. NEALE
Department of Economics,
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Books Received


Amphibians and Reptiles of California.

(Continued on page 40b)
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NEWS AND COMMENT

(Continued from page 365)

"New York City is not sophisticated enough to treat alcoholism as a disease," says Warren flatly. Second, TA believes that employee payment will act as a deterrent. "I want this last drink to be a crisis," says Warren. "They say an alcoholic has to reach his bottom. I want to raise his bottom."

Warren is flexible in his handling of those who come into his office. It doesn't take long for him to spot those who use the program simply as a way to stay out of trouble. These people rarely get a second chance. But "I will go along with the guy who's really trying from now until eternity," says Warren, who has sent the same person through the hospitalization routine as many as six times. The TA, which says it has a success rate of about 65 percent, considers family involvement an important part of its program. If a man doesn't show up for work (95 percent of the employees are men), a counselor will visit his home to find out why. Warren says his staff went on 500 home visits last year. The program is straightforwardly publicized through such things as posters bearing the photograph of a counselor with the caption, "One of these men may save your life."

While the aforementioned programs are set up primarily for the purpose of identifying the alcoholic employee, they do not turn away from the other problems that invariably come into the net. Prime among these are marital and family troubles, financial problems, job dissatisfaction, emotional problems, other illnesses (multiple sclerosis, to take a depressing example, can exhibit the same symptoms as a bad hangover), drug problems, and even gambling. Alcohol counselors are generally prepared to give advice or direction for these troubles.

There are a few companies that have broad-gauged programs for the "troubled employee"—the kind of program Don Godwin of NIAAA's Occupational Programs Branch would like to see all alcoholism programs evolve into. One of the advantages of a troubled employee program is that it gets more self-referrals from alcoholics, who, no matter what the program is called, constitute half of any company's problem workers.

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