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The Relations of Economic, Political and Social Systems

By

KENNETH E. BOULDING

The raw material of social systems is the history of mankind. The record of history, however, is no more than raw material. In order to have knowledge of social systems we must abstract out of the almost infinite complexity of this record those elements which exhibit enough regularity to be subject to analysis. Social systems, that is, are essentially abstractions from reality; without these abstractions, however, we cannot hope to understand reality. A system is anything that is not chaos, and even though history seems highly chaotic at times, we have an intuitive feeling that it is not pure chaos. If it is not chaos, there is system in it, and if there is system in it, there is some hope that the system may be perceived and understood.

All systems potentially consist of three elements which might be labelled necessity, chance, and freedom. In the case of systems which have worked themselves through time into a virtual equilibrium, the elements of chance and freedom are practically non-existent and the element of necessity is all that remains. The solar system is a good case in point. In the formation of this system there may well have been important elements of chance which determined how many planets there should be, how large they should be, and in what orbits they should lie. In so far as the system was created it will have elements of freedom in it also, but this we must leave to the theologians. At present, however, the elements of chance and freedom have almost been eliminated, with the notable exception now of political astronomy. It is necessity that rules the stars or, at least, the planets. Their orbits can be described by difference or differential equations of only the second order. Given the position of the solar system yesterday and today, we can theoretically find an equation which will predict exactly its position tomorrow; given today and tomorrow, we can then predict the next day, and so on indefinitely into the future. It is this stability in the relationship between the positions of the system in successive time periods which constitutes necessity in mechanical systems and which gives us, therefore, the power of prediction. We can predict eclipses because they belong to a system in which the elements of chance and freedom are almost wholly eliminated.

As we move from the physical into the biological systems, the element of chance becomes more important in the dynamic process. We cannot predict the life history of an infant of any kind in the way that we can predict the movement of the planets. We can predict a limited range of life histories.
but we cannot tell in advance out of this limited range which one will be realized. We know that a kitten will not grow up into a dog, but his life history as a cat has many possible variations, none of which can be predicted in advance. It may be a hungry alley cat or a sleek house cat; it may be ferocious or gentle, depending on its experiences. In a living organism we may, perhaps, regard its genetic constitution as embodying the element of necessity in its development, for its genetic constitution is something which it cannot change. Its development depends also, however, on environmental factors, some of which may be subject to necessity but many of which can only be attributed to chance. Systems of this kind are called "stochastic" systems and they are by no means absent even in physics. As we move from the physical through the biological into the social sciences, however, the stochastic element becomes more and more important. Such systems may be expressed by stochastic equations in which there is some random component; money invested at a constant rate of interest in a safe bank grows, according to a simple law of necessity, at a constant rate of growth. Money invested in speculative enterprises grows according to a stochastic system. There may be a constant growth component in it, but from day to day or from year to year a number is picked, as it were, out of a hat and added or subtracted. The actual day-to-day course of the system, therefore, is fundamentally unpredictable, even though the general tenor of its way may be predicted.

The third component of general systems, freedom, is virtually unknown at the physical level except in mixed socio-physical systems. It begins to become important as we reach the higher organisms in biology and it becomes of great importance in social systems. By freedom I mean that element which is introduced into the system by the existence of knowledge structures, or images, and especially by the existence of an image of the future. Freedom is the process by which an image of the future is consciously realized. If I am in Jamaica in December, 1961, it is not because of any mechanical necessity, such as that which moves the planets, for my movements are too complex to be described by differential equations except, perhaps, of an infinite degree. Nor is it satisfactory to explain my appearance in Jamaica on the grounds that my movements constitute a random walk. I may flatter myself, but I am pretty sure that my movements around the face of the earth do not have the mathematical characteristics of a purely random path, that is, a path in which the direction, extent, and changes of movement are determined by the throw of the dice. The mere fact that I return home again occasionally is sufficient to destroy the random walk explanation, simply because a random walker returns home much less often than I do. There must, therefore, be some other explanation of my movements, and this can only be found in the fact that I have an image of the future at any moment of time and that I tend to act in such a way as to make the future conform to my image. If my image of the future involves going to Jamaica in December, 1961, sometime before this date I will make preparations; I will
buy a plane ticket; at the right time I will go to the airport, get on the plane, and eventually arrive in Jamaica. There are, of course, stochastic elements in this process which may interrupt it; I may have a heart attack, the plane may crash, or the world may come to an end; these stochastic elements, however, lurk in every system, but it is one of the great objects of knowledge to lessen their incidence and to lower their probability.

We must recognize, therefore, that in any system which has an important element of freedom in it, knowledge about the system always changes it. We run into this even in the physical sciences in the famous Heisenberg principle, according to which the attempt to inform ourselves about the position or velocity of an electron changes its position or velocity. As we move towards the social sciences, knowledge about the system and information collected from the system becomes a more and more important part of the system itself. This does not mean, however, that knowledge is impossible or that the systems are uncontrollable. Indeed, the possibility of control of social systems arises only as knowledge about them increases. I am by no means a Marxist and, indeed, I regard Marxism as a very dangerous simplification of social dynamics, but I have a lot of sympathy with what Engels called the “leap from necessity into freedom.” We begin to make this leap when our knowledge of social systems rises to the point at which some sort of control becomes possible so that the future is no longer solely in the hands of necessity and chance. We can then form images of the future of society as well as of our own personal lives which have some chance of coming about, a chance which is great enough to make it worthwhile pursuing conscious efforts towards the future that we have in mind. The more inaccurate our knowledge of the social system, of course, the less the element of freedom in it; we may think that we are directing our actions towards a certain future when, in fact, our actions have the effect of taking us away from this future rather than towards it. Nevertheless, the idea that we can plan for a future of society as well as in our own personal lives is, perhaps, one of the most important ideas of the nineteenth century, and it is an idea that we owe in no small measure to Marx himself.

If we are going to reduce the almost inconceivable complexity of human history to manageable, systematic form, we must break up the social system, at least conceptually, into sub-systems, recognizing, of course, but at the same time keeping in the back of our minds, the fact that these sub-systems are not independent and that they constantly interact with each other. A large number of these sub-systems may be identified, but I propose to discuss only four of them which I regard of primary importance. These four I shall label populations systems, exchange systems, threat systems, and learning systems. In all of these we can trace the same three general elements of necessity, chance, and freedom.

In population systems we consider, first of all, the total stock of all those objects or items which are significant from the point of view of social systems. We may consider also the composition of the stock, that is, its division
into various significant categories. Then we consider the dynamics of the stock, that is, its change through time, as this is determined by additions to and subtractions from the stock. The fundamental law of necessity in such a system is that the increase in any stock over a period of time must be equal to the additions to the stock less the subtractions from it, or "births" into it minus "deaths" out of it. This identity is a mechanical necessity which can be avoided neither by chance nor by freedom.

The most significant population system is, of course, the population of human beings themselves. It is possible to make projections of human population and its distribution by area, race, sex, or any other composition by assuming fairly simple relationships between births, deaths, immigration, emigration, and so on into the various groups. These projections represent the element of necessity in population systems; they all take the form of saying that, if certain parameters of the system remain the same, then its course will be as projected. These projections, however, are not predictions because of the chance elements in the system. The parameters themselves, such as the age-specific birth and death rates, are always subject to unpredictable change, and those who believed that the population projections were, in fact, predictions have been grievously disappointed by the experience of the last twenty-five years. Nevertheless, the projections are important, for they give us the range of possible futures and they enable us to make projections of the form, "If there is no change in these parameters, then the future will be like this." We can say, for instance, to use a very crude example, that if the population of Jamaica continues to increase at its present rate, it will double, roughly, every forty years. Population systems also enable us to make projections about the distribution and composition of populations. Cohort analysis enables us to predict, within reasonable margins of error, what the age composition of the population is likely to be in the future. In the United States, for instance, the fact that there were so many more babies born in the forties than there were in the thirties has now created a crisis in the educational system because of the distortion in the age distribution of the population. This is a crisis which was both predictable and predicted. On the other hand, it is extremely dangerous to assume that birth and death rates will continue at present rates or will follow any prescribed course into the future. The failure of the population predictions of the forties were based largely on this mistake.

It is not only to human populations, however, that population analysis applies. It can be applied to anything which has a stock and which has additions to or subtractions from that stock. It can be applied, therefore, to the whole world of capital goods and of commodities; it can be applied even to such things as ideas and images. The famous proposition that capital can only increase if production exceeds consumption is identical in form with the basic identity of all population analysis. A good deal of the theory of economic development rests on this identity. The rate of capital accumulation can be increased only by increasing production or by diminishing con-
sumption. Frequently, the latter is the only alternative open. So we run into the iron law of development; that development implies parsimony, whether involuntary or imposed.

It is clear that population systems broadly interpreted cover a large part of the field of social dynamics; nevertheless, they do not cover it all. As we move from demography into economics, for instance, we find that the concept of exchange becomes more and more important. Exchange systems may, perhaps, be regarded as a sub-division of population systems as they essentially involve the redistribution of existing stocks of things among people. Exchange systems, however, have peculiarities of their own which perhaps justify their classification as a special sub-system. Exchange is a basic form of human interaction; it is basic, not only to economic life, but also to all social relationships, such as marriage, friendship, and all kinds of collective action. We think of it fundamentally as an exchange of "goods" and its basic proposition is, "I will do something good for you if you will do something good for me." It is a positive-sum game in which all parties can be better off, but it is also a curious mixture of co-operative and competitive elements. It is co-operative in so far as there is gain to both parties; it is competitive in so far as the distribution of this gain depends on the terms of trade, that is, on the ratio of exchange, and any movement in the ratio of exchange makes one party relatively better off and one party relatively worse off than they were before.

Exchange systems can become seriously disturbed by changes in the medium of exchange. Inflation or deflation in the monetary system, for instance, disturbs the whole system of exchange because of the fact that many exchange relationships involve a time interval between one transaction and its reciprocal transaction. Exchange, of course, always consists of two transfers or transactions, but these do not have to occur at the same time. In a debt relationship, for instance, or in the implicit exchange among the generations in which the middle aged support the young in expectation that they themselves will be supported when they are old, and support the old in repayment of the support that they received when they were young, there is a substantial time interval between one transfer and the transfer which completes the exchange. If, in the interval, there is a general social change, for instance, in the price level, the whole system of transfers over time is disturbed. Inflation discriminates against the creditors, deflation against the debtors, and economic development can easily discriminate against the generation that initiates it. Marriage and friendship both may be wrecked by disappointment in deferred exchange, though in this case, the commodity may simply be affection or approval. Political parties and political structures, likewise, are involved in this time exchange; a political party makes promises and, if these are not fulfilled, the voters may take their revenge at the next election. The whole dynamics of society and the dynamics of population systems themselves are profoundly affected by the operations of the exchange system. Thus, the great depression in the United States, which resulted fun-
damentally from a breakdown in the exchange system, had profound effects on the birth rate, on future populations, and on the accumulation of capital.

Exchange systems, again, have certain elements of necessity in them. The relative price structure, for instance, is not arbitrary and cannot be changed at will without severe repercussions on the society. The closer we get to perfect competition, the greater the element of necessity in the system and the more all-pervasive and compelling is the "law of supply and demand." We cannot force the price structure away from some equilibrium position without producing serious consequences in the way of shortages and surpluses of commodities. As we move towards monopoly, and especially towards oligopoly or bilateral-monopoly, however, the element of chance in the system becomes more important. Where we have bargaining, there will be a range of prices at which a bargain may be struck, but there is no way of predicting in advance where within this range the bargain will actually be found. Under these circumstances there is a genuinely stochastic element in the dynamics of a price system which cannot be neglected. There are also, however, elements of freedom in it. The equilibrium price structure is not an absolute necessity; it can be changed under appropriate governmental action and pressure. It can be distorted by price control and by taxation. Within limits, the consequences of these distortions can be predicted, and the control of the price system may well be an instrument by which we move towards some image of the future. We may wish, for instance, to make vice expensive and virtue cheap, and we may be able to do this both through the tax system and through direct prohibitions or encouragements. We may look into the future and decide that some commodity, for instance, water, which is plentiful now, is going to be scarce in the future. We may wish, therefore, to distort the present price system in order to anticipate the future scarcity. The present price system, for instance, affects the course of future technology; if we make something expensive it is likely to be economized. This is one argument, for instance, for distorting the price system in favour of higher money wages. Then a "disequilibrium" system would create dynamic change. Even though high wages create unemployment, it may be better to have unemployment than low wages because, if labour is scarce, it will be economized and it is the economizing of labour which constitutes the essence of economic development. These elements of freedom in the price system are not well understood or worked out, but they undoubtedly exist, and the more explicit we can be about them the better our policy is likely to be. The argument that the price system must lie wholly in the realm of necessity is not, I think, acceptable to modern ears.

We have still by no means encompassed all the relationships of society and here, again, even though what I have called "threat systems" may be viewed as a special case of exchange systems, they nevertheless present so many peculiarities that they deserve to be singled out for special treatment. An exchange system is based on a transfer of goods, a threat system on the transfer of "bads." An exchange system, as we have seen, is based on the
proposition “If you do something good for me, I will do something good for you.” A threat system is based on the proposition, “If you do not do something good for me I will do something bad to you.” Threat systems are the basis of politics as exchange systems are the basis of economics. Political power fundamentally is based on threats. Actual political life, however, is made up of a curious mixture of exchange systems and threat systems. In part, and perhaps in the largest part, government is always by consent, that is, by exchange. We give up some of our personal sovereignty to the state, as we give up some of our personal income in taxation because we feel that the state does something for us in exchange. It gives us protection, identification, an enlarged personality, and other benefits and, in so far as it does this, the system may quite properly be regarded as a system of exchange. This, however, is not the whole story. Man early discovered that threats were a powerful method of social organization. We can, indeed, conceive of classical civilization as essentially a threat system based on the fact that, with the invention of agriculture, the food producer produced more than he could eat himself or rather, than he needed to eat himself, and that with the food surplus the ruler was able to feed an army or a coercive organization which would then compel the food producer to give up the food that would feed the agent that coerced him. As long as this is unchallenged, this is a very stable social system. As the civilizations of the Mayans and of Mohenjodaro testify, the threat, of course, need not always be a physical one. It can also be spiritual. Many of the early civilizations seem to have been based on spiritual threats, that is, on the capacity of a priesthood to threaten people with spiritual damnation, if they did not turn over their food surpluses to the social organization.

Slavery in the early colonial system was a good example of the threat system in an almost pure form. With the surplus which the slave produced over his subsistence, the master could employ a coercive power with which he could threaten the slave’s life. As long as the slave preferred slavery to death, and as long as the master was able and willing to use the means of coercion at his disposal, the system continued. The demise of the system occurred, not so much because of any internal instability, but because of the fact that both its moral and its economic base were eroded by the development of more profitable systems of social organization, namely, a system of exchange. An exchange system is fundamentally more productive than a threat system simply because the exchange of goods encourages the production of goods, whereas the threat of ill discourages the production of goods. While a one-sided threat system is internally stable, threat systems in themselves develop instability because of the fact that they become, not one-sided but bi-lateral. The proposition, “If you do not do good to me, I will do bad to you,” becomes “If you do bad to me I will do bad to you.” It is hard to keep a monopolistic threat system intact, and, against one threat system, another threat system tends to be aroused. Threat systems, therefore, constantly decline into war systems or deterrence systems which seem to
have an inherent instability in them. This is the main reason for the rise and fall of civilizations, and the long cycles which have characterized human development for the last five thousand years. We are now at the extreme end of this period in which the threat system has become so universal that it threatens to destroy us all.

Any account of social dynamics would be incomplete if it did not include learning systems. Learning, of course, is involved in all the other systems but here, again, it has peculiarities of its own which make it desirable to single it out. A learning system may be defined broadly as a social process by which the image of the world possessed by the individuals of the society comes to change. At each moment each individual has an image of the world which includes an image of space, of time, of the past and the future, of his role in society, of things that are expected of him, the things he expects of others, his obligations and his rights, and so on. This image largely determines his behaviour. If people find themselves in situations where their behaviour does not reinforce their image, then either their image must change or they will find themselves in a new situation. If a man thinks he is Napoleon and acts as if he were Napoleon, when in fact he is not, he will soon find himself segregated in a mental hospital in which his role is acceptable. We might add that if he thinks he is Napoleon when he is Napoleon he finds himself at Saint Helena. Society moves and changes by an enormous interaction of images, behaviours, disappointments, role fulfilments or unfulfilments, and the constant interaction of images on society and society on the images.

The most significant thing that has happened, perhaps in the whole history of mankind, is the formalization and systemization of the learning process itself in what we know as science. This has resulted in an enormous acceleration of change in the image. In folk culture the image is very resistant to change. If messages are received which are inconsistent with the image, they are generally rejected. Because of this stability in the image, a primitive society in which the processes of learning are not specialized, provided that it is left to itself, is likely to be very stable and will reproduce itself generation after generation. The specialization of the learning process has introduced an enormous dynamic into human society in the last four hundred years and has now placed us in a pace of social change so rapid that now we go through in a single year a change in the basic parameters of the social system at least equivalent to what took a thousand years in the age of classical civilization.

This specialization of the learning system offers both great hope and great danger to mankind. It offers hope because it is only out of this specialization that we can hope to understand the nature of social systems and, hence, move from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom. It is only by the specialized activities of the knowledge seekers, especially in the social sciences, that we can hope to understand the social system sufficiently well to be able to control it and to be able to move into a positive image of the
future through our own volition and policy. Otherwise, we are merely slaves of necessity or victims of chance. On the other hand, the very specialization of the learning process and the rapidity of change make it all the more difficult to understand and especially to get widespread understanding of the nature of the change itself. Let us imagine what the world would be like if the parameters of the physical systems in which we operate changed as rapidly and as unpredictably as the parameters of the social systems. Suppose, for instance, that on Monday the gravitational constant was low, whereas on Tuesday it was high; we would literally never know how to get out of bed. On Monday we fly through the window and Tuesday we would crack our head on the floor. To live at all in a world like this we would have to have an elaborate system of scientific information; we would have to have a gravimeter by the bedside to tell us before we even got up whether to make a desperate leap or a gentle movement.

This, however, is precisely the fix we are in in social systems. Their significant parameters such as, for instance, the price level, the productivity of labour, the range of the deadly missile, or the proportion of communications received outside the family, change constantly and often with great rapidity. Under these circumstances, it is extremely difficult to know how to operate and it is not surprising that we make serious mistakes. Under these circumstances too, however, it is all the more important to devise accurate and unbiased methods of sifting information and of condensing information into forms which are readily appreciated. We desperately need a social systems equivalent of the gravimeter by the bedside. In economics we have this to some extent in the form of national income statistics. It was still possible in the United States in 1931 to argue about whether there was a depression or not. Today, we cannot have a turndown for two or three months without this fact coming to the attention of all the significant decision-makers in this society. In international systems we have not yet reached this position; we have, in fact, a system of information which is almost designed to be corrupted. Both diplomats and intelligence agencies produce an extremely biased picture of the truth, by nature of the social system which they themselves inhabit, and until we can get more accurate and more “scientific” information in international systems the chance of handling them well is very slim.

In religious systems, in family life, and in the broader learning process by which the images, skills, and ideas of society move from one year to the next our information processes are not organized at all. Because of this, public expenditures, especially in the field of health, education, and welfare, are usually made very inefficiently. In the United States, at any rate, we seem to have a very fundamental principle, that while we are willing to spend a lot of money to see that public funds are spent honestly, we will not spend a dollar to see that they are spent wisely. Until this situation is rectified, one must remain highly sceptical about the advantages of any substantial expansion in the public sector, even in the most developed economies of the
capitalist world. As a corollary one might say that there is no socialist country in which an expansion of the private market sector would not result in a marked increase in economic efficiency, even though this might not result in the desired rate of social change.

I should perhaps, add a fifth system to the four I have already outlined, though I am hesitant to do this because we understand so little about it. The four systems outlined above, however, do not encompass an important social phenomenon which could variously be described as social integration, affection, altruism, or even by the simple word “love.” Love systems are those in which the individual comes to identify his own desires with those of another. These are important in the explanation of the institution of the family, of the church, and of nationalism, of the phenomena of philanthropy and self-sacrifice, and of all those areas of life where we do not merely exchange or threaten but in which we identify. A sense of identification, of course, participates in both exchange and threat systems; the love of country, like the love of a spouse, has elements of exchange in it or perhaps even of threat. These elements do not encompass the whole picture, however, and I suspect that we have to include an autonomous element of integration if we are to obtain a full description of social systems.

The complaint may be made with some justice that I have not dealt adequately with the title of the paper, in that my classification and hierarchy of systems does not correspond closely to the division between the economic, the political, and the social. My only defence to this charge is that I believe that the distinctions I have made are more elemental and important than the usual distinctions on which the customary division of the social sciences are based. It is true, of course, that economic systems concentrate around the phenomenon of exchange, and, if we like, we can identify exchange systems with economics. Economic systems cannot wholly be understood, however, apart from the economic operations of the government, especially through the systems of unilateral transfers in taxes and subsidies. In order to understand this element in the economic system we have to invoke either threat systems or love systems. The budgets of states are arrived at by an extremely complex process of exchange, threat, and philanthropy; the same is true, as a matter of fact, for the budget of individuals.

Similarly, even though we may wish to make a certain identification of political science with threat systems, these also do not quite encompass its traditional field. Government is by consent as well as by threat; in order to explain government by consent we have to introduce either exchange systems or love systems. We consent also because we identify our own interest with those of the coercer. Even in international relations where we might suppose that threat systems reign supreme we find that there are examples of the systems of stable peace, for instance between the United States and Canada, in which the threat system has been so completely overlaid by other relationships that it has ceased to be important or, at least, visible.

Social systems are less clearly demarcated traditionally from political or
economic systems. This has always caused difficulties, for the sociologist has never quite decided whether he is studying everything about the social system or whether he has a demarcated field within it. Sociologists like George Homans attempt to make exchange the basis of all social relationship. I suspect this is quite inadequate and that even in the most elementary forms of social interaction, threat systems and love systems are important and that all these, of course, exist in the setting of population systems and learning systems. It would certainly be tidy if the sociologist could be designated to study love systems as the core of his discipline, that is, the systems by which integration takes place. To put the matter in another way, the principal subject of sociology would then be alienation which is, of course, the opposite of integration. This division of labour is probably too tidy and most sociologists would object to it. However, it does seem to me that the problem of how, in the course of social interaction, we learn or fail to learn to identify with other people and with other organizations is peculiar to the "sociological" part of social systems.

As for the interaction among these various systems, it would take, of course, a large volume even to summarize them. I will take but a single example from the problem of economic development. Economic development as a process can be described fairly accurately by means of population systems. Its principal measure is the increase in per capita income which is, of course, the birth rate of commodities per person or the amount of commodities to which the average individual gives birth in the course of a year's activity. There is a somewhat mechanical economic theory of economic development which is essentially an application of population analysis, arising out of the assumption that income is a function of total capital and that the increase in capital is a function of the differences in income and consumption. This mechanical theory, however, is descriptive rather than predictive. In order to give it flesh and blood we must have some notion about the role of the exchange system, especially are reflected in the price structure, in this process. We must know also something about the role of threat systems, that is, the possibility of the use of the coercive power. On the whole, it may be said that the capitalist development rests on exchange systems and socialist development on the threat systems, but this, as usual, is too simple a point of view and many modifications would have to be made. It can be said also, I suspect, that a prerequisite of economic development is a certain minimum of social integration. Economic development always involves costs to certain parts of the population. It is a painful process which may involve a gross injustice to a whole generation who sacrifice for growth in order that the next generation or so may enjoy the benefits. Such a system is impossible unless there is a strong sense of social identification. In traditional capitalism the sense of identification is supposed to be found through the family. The present generation is expected to be parsimonious because the parents identify with the children or even the great-grandchildren who will enjoy the fruits of the parsimony. The family, that is, is a love system extending through
time. Socialist development attempts to expand this sense of identification to the whole society, at least as embodied in the élite party. There is a thin dividing line, however, between love systems and threat systems and there is a constant tendency for one to pass into the other. Thus, capitalist development has seldom proceeded very far without the exercise of police power, and socialist development seems to be even more dependent on coercion, as the record of Stalin shows. It is in the study of the subtle interweaving of these various systems of society, therefore, that the best hope of understanding of social systems and, therefore, ultimately, their control lies.