
ORGANIZATIONS, SOCIAL STRUCTURE, AND HISTORICAL CHANGE

Towards an Historical Sociology of Organizations

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ABSTRACT

This essay is an attempt to distill and sharpen extant theoretical critiques of functionalist approaches to social change and development while focusing them on a parallel, currently dominant approach to the sociology of organizations. This approach is found in the thriving literature that seeks to relate structures of social relations in complex organizations to environments and technologies, using an implicit model of the organization as a self-equilibrating entity. As an alternative, we argue for the importance of relating organizations concretely to historically-situated social structures. Specifically, this requires careful attention both to the shifting kinds of functional and class distinctions between groups in organizations and to the conflicts between these groups and the ways in which large scale social changes shift the resources available to one group or another. Towards the pursuit of this new set of concerns is offered a framework of concepts, distinctions, and problems.

A critical literature has proliferated in recent years over a heretofore influential approach to the process of social change and economic development. This critique has been concentrated particularly where this approach has found its clearest expression--in functionalist concepts and theories. Functionalism, however, while most often the target of sustained critical attack in past years, merely formulates in an especially coherent manner several disparate elements of an approach to thinking about social processes that is common to a wide variety of social scientists and historians alike. The most worthwhile portion of this critical literature has been that which raises basic theoretical issues: about the nature of sociological explanation, the most advantageous units of analysis, and the kinds of concepts to employ in thinking about society. Since these are basic issues in social science, these same avenues of criticism apply with undiminished force to the contemporary field of complex organizations--a field which has long been dominated by ways of thinking about social processes that bear remarkable similarity to oft-criticized approaches to social change and development.

These separate fields of inquiry have shared two common elements. First is the tendency--either implicit or explicit--to conceive of the object of inquiry (a society or an organization) as a homeostatic system, regulated by an internal necessity to maintain cohesion and stability in the face of disequilibrating disruptions. Closely related to this first tendency is the second--a tendency to conceive of elements external to these self-equilibrating entities in highly abstract, almost unidimensional terms. The result is often a level of abstraction from

social processes that diverts attention from the complex workings of economy and social structure. This has been a particularly serious shortcoming in that portion of the organizational literature that seeks to relate the organization to its societal environment. Such an approach can systematically bias our understanding of such critical factors as technological change, while obscuring the effect of others that are possibly of equal importance.

In what follows we will attempt four things: 1) to distill and fortify extant critiques of theories of social change and development, concentrating on those aspects that have most direct parallel relevance to the field of complex organizations; 2) to highlight the parallels between the dominant approaches in the two fields, turning elements of the above-distilled critique onto organization theories; 3) to outline a set of substantive concerns and conceptual elements that contribute to a needed reorientation in the sociology of organizations, and 4) to argue en route that this shift in theoretical orientation requires an accompanying shift in methodological orientation--specifically a wedding of historical to cross-sectional research.

I. Theories of Social Change and Development

A. Society as a Self-Equilibrating System.

Central to the perspective on social change offered by such writers as Parsons (1966), Levy (1966), and Smelser (1959), is the conception of society as a structured system tending towards equilibrium. Within this perspective, each aspect of social structure is endowed with a specific function that contributes

towards the maintenance of the existing structure. This functional tendency towards equilibrium is at the root of any process of social change. Whenever this equilibrium becomes unstable, due either to disturbances coming from within the system or impinging on it from without, "the tendency is to change, through mutual adjustment, to a new equilibrium" (Smelser, 1959, p. 10). This process of change is essentially a process of structural differentiation, resulting in more complex structures that function to re-channel disturbances and integrate the entire system at a new level of structural effectiveness and societal equilibrium (Parsons, 1966, p. 22). The source of change, in short, is the interaction between this posited tendency towards equilibrium and disturbances in the system, while the process of social change itself is in essence one of structural differentiation. This evolutionary process through which social systems become more complex and differentiated constitutes the central dimension of social development (Parsons, 1966, pp. 1-4).

This perspective has often been criticized for its alleged "static" bias, and for its supposed neglect of sources of change exogenous to the social system. This, so the argument goes, leads to an ability to explain societal integration but not change, and to an inability to incorporate sources of change external to a given social system. Neither of these, however, are particularly appropriate or powerful critiques. These criticisms miss the unique logic of the concept "equilibrium" in Parsons' social system--the posited tendency towards equilibrium becomes simultaneously a source of change when the system is

out of balance. Within the logic of the theory, further, exogenous sources of change are not neglected--they appear merely as stimuli to which a system must respond. If there is a criticism to be made here about exogenous sources of change, it is not that exogenous factors are neglected, but that the way that they are related to the social system is inadequate. The problem with the kinds of explanation offered by this perspective is not so much in their static or endogenous biases, but in the very nature of an explanation that flows from an a priori conception of society as a self-equilibrating system.

The weaknesses of this kind of explanation are most evident in the account of structural change in the British cotton industry presented in Smelser's Social Change in the Industrial Revolution. Smelser offers a detailed historical account of change in industrial and family structure during the industrial revolution, overlaid with the elaborate theoretical framework of functional analysis. He traces the process of change in two social units, industry and the family--conceived of as 'systems'--through an entire process of differentiation from the initial dissatisfactions and disturbances in the system to the structural adaptations that successfully restored the system's equilibrium. Initial dissatisfactions with the industrial system, Smelser argues, stemmed from the increasing demand for cotton textiles in the late 1700s, and a resulting "sense of opportunity" which was frustrated by a variety of institutional bottlenecks in the putting-out system of the period (Smelser, 1959, pp. 63-68). These new market opportunities, when linked to a Protestant value system,

gave rise to "disturbances" within the system: friction between spinners and weavers, particularly when the former failed adequately to supply the latter; "excited speculation about instantaneous fortunes"; and a related browbeating of the poor for their alleged immorality, theft, and lack of discipline (Smelser, 1959, p. 80). This floating dissatisfaction with the level of productivity in the system stimulated a period marked by a search for new ideas and resulted in a number of institutional and technological innovations. These innovations, when initially applied, led to a chain reaction of further disequilibrium and innovation as the various stages of spinning and weaving changed at different rates. The underlying process of change was one of continuing differentiation. The variety of productive roles formerly combined in the family of the cottage weaver or spinner were gradually differentiated from family life and placed in a new factory setting, with an accompanying new set of specialized industrial roles (Smelser, 1959, pp. 81-128).

But a new level of equilibrium was not won so easily. It was not enough merely to bring the industrial system to a higher level of productivity by differentiating and more effectively coordinating a set of productive roles previously lodged in the weaver's cottage. This process of industrial differentiation itself set off a chain of dissatisfactions and disturbances by disrupting the family system, as the demise of the family economy drastically altered the social and economic roles of its members (Smelser, 1959, pp. 180-213). Smelser argues that it was during this phase that the working class was most prone to strikes, riots, and machine-breaking. It was not until another round of

structural differentiation occurred--this time relocating former family functions in such institutions as trade unions and cooperative societies--and not until a further round of "channelling" and "handling" of disturbances through factory legislation and the poor laws, that the social system was able once again to approach equilibrium.

The beauty of this account is that Smelser is able to parcel the historical record so neatly into his theoretical boxes. By carefully assigning each bit of history a functional place in his scheme of differentiation, he brings a plausible order--at several different levels--to an overwhelmingly complex process of historical change. Smelser, in fact, is so successful at the task he sets for himself that we are almost led to confuse his descriptive facility with successful explanation. As Smelser himself reminds us: "the nature of our 'explanation' was to relate a multitude of complex social phenomena to a single set of analytical propositions without varying the logic of the propositions themselves" (Smelser, 1959, p. 384).

Precisely. Smelser, as has Parsons and others within his perspective, arranges a series of stages and historical events into a logical scheme, labels it differentiation, and with liberal references to his conception of the self-equilibrating social system, assumes explanatory closure². Not only does such an approach confuse serial description with explanation (Smith, 1973, p. 58), but, by identifying "functions" as causes, leads to a teleological explanation that attributes an imperative impulse to an entity (the social system) that is little more than a theoretical construct (Giddens, 1971, pp. 90-91). As

Nisbet (1969, pp. 189-207) has argued, this is explanation qua biological metaphor--an explanation also based on a very real circularity of reasoning. Sorting historical data into such categories to provide empirical evidence for the conception of a self-equilibrating social system is based on a prior acceptance of categories spawned by a belief in that conception. Any large social change, in other words, is by definition an instance of equilibration while it is at the same time the only possible evidence for the operation of such tendencies. Within such a presentation, the search for causation can only lead in a circular fashion directly back to the a priori conception of society as a system tending towards equilibrium. This tendency, like Hegel's Idea, is the central mover of social change. To be satisfied with the explanation one must tolerate its circularity and embrace the teleology.

B. The Social System as a Unit of Analysis.

Apart from the questionable nature of the explanations that flow from such a perspective, there is good cause for doubting whether a social system, so conceived, is the most appropriate unit of analysis. At issue here is whether the conception of a self-equilibrating social system responding to exogenous disturbances via a process of differentiation is the most effective way to approach social change. Wallerstein (1974), drawing partly from earlier authors (Baran, 1957; Frank, 1967), has argued that a local social system exists within a dense network of economic relations with other local systems, and that these patterned relations are central determinants of the course of

development and change. The appropriate unit of analysis, in other words, is not a linguistically, ethnically, or politically bounded social system, but a world system of economic relations. The research problem for Wallerstein is not to trace the reaction of a self-regulating social system to "disturbances" in the form of external stimuli, but to relate the processes of social change in a society to the development of the world system with which it is intertwined.

The advantages of Wallerstein's approach emerge most clearly when comparing with Parsons' his treatment of the development of what would be considered, from the functionalist perspective, "unsuccessful" cases of adaptation and differentiation. It is no accident that Parsons (1971), when developing his evolutionary perspective, selects only those social systems which, when arranged in order, exhibit some logical progression of differentiation and development. Greece after Hellenistic times is of no interest. After the fall of Rome, the Mediterranean is abandoned and attention shifts, several centuries later, to northwest Europe (Parsons, 1971, pp. 29-62). A functionalist perspective, given the peculiar nature of the explanations it typically spawns, has very little to say about societies whose tendency towards equilibrium does not lead to an evolutionary process of structural differentiation. In the case of Spain or the northern Italian city-states of the 16th century, an analysis parallel to that of Smelser could do little more than enumerate the internal reasons why these social systems failed to respond successfully to such disequilibrating stimuli as growing markets and

opportunities for colonial exploitation.

The strength of Wallerstein's analysis is not only that such "unsuccessful" societies are of interest, but that their lack of development (or even de-development) can only be understood in relation to the rapidly developing European world economy. For Wallerstein, the phenomenon of uneven development is of central importance:

Whereas in eastern Europe the landlords forced the laborers back onto the land because the expanded cash-crop production required it, England took a route of pasturage (which required less labor) and increased efficiency of arable production (which required less labor) (Wallerstein, 1974, p. 255).

As the European world economy began to take shape after the "crisis of feudalism" of the 15th and 16th centuries, in other words, selected countries in west Europe experienced estate-clearing, developed an expropriated labor force, and began commodity production first for national and then for world markets. In areas that had experienced these same changes as early as the 13th century--the Spanish Netherlands and north Italy--this process of change either stagnated or was reversed. East of the Elbe, precisely the reverse of the west European trend took place--a "second serfdom" developed where previously freed serfs were brought back onto large forced-labor estates which produced commodity crops for the Baltic trade.

For Wallerstein, these are not merely a group of social systems arrayed according to the degree of sustained success they exhibit in responding to external and internal stimuli. The development of each cannot be understood apart from the development of other parts of the system. Each local society, in this case, was responding to the same "external" stimulus--

the economic crisis of the 16th century. The differing, indeed in some cases opposite reactions to the same phenomenon occurred because (speaking specifically of the relation between east and west Europe):

the two areas became complimentary parts of a more complex single system, the European world-economy, in which eastern Europe played the role of raw-materials producer for the industrializing west, thus coming to have, in Malowist's phrase, "an economy which, at bottom (was) close to the classic colonial pattern" (Wallerstein, 1974, pp. 95-96).

What is to be explained, then, is how these societies came to occupy their positions in this world system of market relations. Wallerstein's explanation revolves around the interplay of two broad sets of factors: price fluctuations, bullion flows, and the evolution of trading patterns, on the one hand, and local historically-developed class relations, land tenure patterns, and governmental forms on the other. This historical interaction between these sets of factors spurs changes within each area which stimulate or hinder capital accumulation, and at the same time structures relationships between areas. By the end of the 16th century this structured system of economic relations--the European world economy--was the central axis around which widely varying forms of local development revolved.

The conception of a self-equilibrating social system responding to disequilibrating stimuli, in short, is inadequate for the task of accounting for social change in a world economy where complex patterns of relations exist between societies-- for two reasons. First, the developmental logic attributed to separate social systems seems particularly ill-equipped to account for divergent courses of development in the core and periphery of

such a system. Second, the concepts within this perspective that might possibly account for the relations between separate social systems are far too abstract for their task. The broad variety of concrete and specific relations that exist do much more than create disturbances to which social systems must respond. By collapsing this variety of relations into mere disequilibrating disturbances, we lose a great deal of explanatory power.

C. Level of Abstraction.

Wallerstein's point, clearly, is far more than simply that a larger unit of analysis is appropriate. His is simultaneously a more important issue: with what kinds of concepts, and at what level of prior abstraction, should we set about to analyze social processes? The functionalist account, remember, begins with a highly abstract construct, the social system, endowed with inherent tendencies towards stability, within which empirical social phenomena are incorporated as "disruptions", "adjustments", or some other function. Wallerstein, on the other hand, sticks far more closely to concrete social phenomena. His central theoretical construct, the world system, does not appear to him in the guise of abstract functions and tendencies endowed with a preconceived movement of their own. Rather, there are concrete social groups, state forms, and patterns of conflict which themselves exhibit tendencies towards movement and change in the complex empirical reality Wallerstein finds in the historical record. Thus instead of seeing examples of "disruption", "adaptation", and "differentiation" within a

self-regulated social system, Wallerstein looks at the balance of power and resources among existing social groups and at how economic changes in the world system shift this balance, and thus alter the social relations between groups that favor particular modes of development. Wallerstein locates his explanation of social change in these groups and in these observed conflicts, not in the claimed tendencies of a preconceived model of a social system. This differing level of abstraction, just as much as his broader unit of analysis, is what allows Wallerstein more effectively to trace the interrelations among differing societies in the developing world system (Wallerstein, 1974, p. 95-112).

A comparison between Smelser's and Unwin's (1957) accounts of the process of differentiation in British industrial organization reveals the kinds of important factors that are abstracted out of the functionalist account. Unwin's account for the 16th and 17th centuries parallels, in striking ways, Smelser's for the 18th and 19th. Unwin traces the differentiation of industrial organization and productive roles from the early craft guilds of the late 15th century, where the roles of workman, foreman, employer, merchant and shopkeeper were combined, to the situation at the end of the Stuart era, where each of these roles found their expression in different social groups and organizations. Where Smelser's functional account located the impulse for such differentiation in the logic of his social system, however, Unwin roots the process of differentiation in the concrete relations and conflicts that existed between

industrial groups at each stage of historical development.

In this process of differentiation, the impulse to change was provided by the continuous tensions between productive groups with opposing interests. Within the early guilds, there was an inherent instability in the relations between crafts at different stages in the work process and between craftsmen in the same craft guilds. Those craftsmen who made finished products--saddlers and weavers--often developed a trading interest and gradually evolved a quasi-employer role towards other craftsmen--tanners and dyers. Further, within each guild there often developed separate trading interests. These trading interests, by virtue of their advantages over producers, who were restricted in the number of outlets for their products, came to dominate the rest of the craftsmen in their guild. Through these two distinct processes opposing groups with conflicting interests arose within the existing forms of organization. The merchant interest, by virtue of their control over the craft administration, gradually subjugated the journeymen producers by further restricting the possibility of their advancing to the level of master. Within this form of organization the journeymen no longer found their interests defended in the organization controlled by master-merchants, whose interests were opposite theirs. There emerged, as Unwin shows, a long conflict over enforcement of craft regulations and, when that failed, a slow movement, eventually successful by some journeymen, to break away from the old guilds and form yeomanry organizations (Unwin, 1957: pp. 20-40).

Similar conflicts riddled later Elizabethan companies and spurred another round of differentiation. These chartered companies experienced continual struggles for over a century by small masters to preserve their independence from large merchant elements. The small masters continually bombarded the crown with petitions for separate charters and with suits to gain enforcement of craft regulations often ignored in the merchant-controlled companies. One strategy of the small masters was to pool their funds to provide resources of funds and materials to bypass merchants. When these groups were able to obtain independent royal charters, they began to sell shares to help keep their enterprises afloat. Just as these small masters had gradually struggled free of merchant domination, thus establishing early forms of the joint-stock company, they came to occupy a similar dominant position as employers over the journeymen. The journeymen's parallel struggle after 1650 to protect their interests against these employers comprises the earliest history of the trade union movement (Unwin, 1957: pp. 156-164).

This shifting historical development of social relations between groups, simultaneously the result and the cause of forms of conflict surrounding them, is the dynamic element in Unwin's account of structural differentiation from the early craft guilds to the first joint-stock companies. Unwin describes a process of competition between related trades over extending their domains into that of other crafts and a constant struggle over who would gain economic advantage by standing between the

rest of the crafts and the market. Through this conflict evolved a gradual separation of distributive and productive functions. At the same time, the struggle of the small masters to free themselves from merchant domination in Elizabethan companies prepared the way for a new type of organization that extended its authority over the entire process of production. This new type of organization, finally, set the stage for the later historical process of differentiation that is the concern of Smelser.

It is clear that Unwin's entire account, by labelling the various conflicts we have described "disturbances", could easily be fit into Smelser's conceptual scheme. But it is equally clear that in doing so we would abstract from those elements crucial to Unwin's explanation. Nowhere could the abstraction of a functionalist perspective be more of a disadvantage. In this case, it would obscure the groups and conflicts that are key explanatory elements. In the place of such an explanation--based in concrete concepts with clear empirical referent--we would sort the observed process into functions, and defer explanation to the inherent tendency of equilibrium in social systems. We could do so only at the expense of our understanding of the processes we are pretending to study.

D. Some Consequences of Abstracting from Social Groups.

Such a level of abstraction not only obscures our understanding of potentially important explanatory factors--particularly social groups and the relations between them--it can also, by obscuring other factors with which they may be closely related, truncate our understanding of those factors that remain in the conceptual scheme. This is particularly the case for technologi-

cal change, an innovation which for Smelser was the result of free-floating dissatisfactions with current levels of productivity. Once the innovation was made, its application had a tremendous impact on the process of differentiation, creating stresses and strains between branches of industry and within family structure--strains which themselves required a further process of differentiation in the social system. Within this abstract system, therefore, technological change appears as almost an exogenous shock on an ordered system of relations. Its immediate impact on social relations are far more explicit in this conception than the prior and continuing impact of social relations on the process of technological change. When Smelser attributes technological change to a "search for innovation" triggered by "dissatisfactions" with the existing productive capacity, he is saying in essence that technological changes occur because there emerges a demand for them. It is not important, in this perspective, to root these impulses in concrete social structures and the historically-specific social groups which comprise them. For all intents and purposes, technological change appears on the social scene without a clear sense of the social processes that created both demand and supply for specific types of technology, and created a distribution of material resources and forms of domination between groups that favored their application.

Such a perspective on technological change is by no means restricted to those using an explicitly functionalist framework. The same perspective can be found in a wide variety of writings

by historians and social scientists who offer no concrete exposition of social groups and conflicts in the process of development. Kuznets, for example, argues that technological changes comprise an "independent variable" in the process of economic growth and structural change. In the modern period, the epochal innovation that provided new potential for economic growth was "the extended application of science to the problems of technology" (Kuznets, 1966: pp. 1-2; 9). The process of development requires what Kuznets calls "the interplay of technological and institutional changes," but this interplay is primarily that of the technological on the institutional: "Even if the impulse to growth is provided by a major technological innovation, the societies that adopt it must modify their preexisting institutional structure." This includes the "emergence of new institutions and a diminishing importance of the old", and changes in "the relative position of various economic and social groups" (Kuznets, 1966: pp. 5-6). Kuznets presents us with a vision of a social system having to adapt its structure to the demands of technology in order to reap the potential for growth.

A parallel perspective is offered by Landes, who virtually identifies industrialization with technical change: "The heart of the Industrial Revolution was an interrelated succession of technological changes" (Landes, 1969: p. 1). As for Kuznets, further, these new technologies were the impulse for the social changes that accompanied development: they brought with them new forms of industrial organization, workplace discipline, and shifts in power relations between social groups. "These material

advances in turn have provoked an promoted a complex of economic, social, political, and cultural changes, which have reciprocally influenced the rate and course of technological development" (Landes, 1969: pp. 2-5).³ It is a small step from this to the perspective offered by Kerr and his associates, where a whole variety of social relations in industrial societies are viewed as "imperatives intrinsic to the industrialization process"--imperatives that derive not from social life but from "the character of science and technology and the requirements inherent in modern methods of production" (1960: p. 33).

The causal importance attributed to technology here is closely related to the conceptions used: of society as a system of functional parts or of economic growth as the result of the combined impact of several independent variables. Without an equally detailed and concrete conception of the social conditions underlying technological innovation, the innovations themselves seem to take on an autonomous determining role in the course of social and institutional change. This appearance is largely the result of an approach which abstracts from the social groups that comprise society.

An example of thwarted technological change in Unwin's account of Elizabethan guilds provides some clues about what factors we miss by abstracting from existing social relations. In the second year of Elizabeth's reign a Venetian inventor presented to the Court of Assistants of the Clothworkers' Company of London a labor-saving machine for fulling broad cloth. The merchants who dominated this governing body found

little of interest in the device. Their response is instructive-- they felt the machine would exert a disintegrating influence on their guild organization (Unwin, 1957: p. 117). In order to understand this response--and thus the antipathy to technological change--one has to remember that the primary groups confronting one another in the Elizabethan company were the small masters on the one hand, and the merchant interests on the other. One also has to remember, as Unwin recounted elsewhere, that the merchants at the time dominated both the guild administration and the small masters, mediating between the producers and the market, and were able to manipulate the price the masters received for their manufactured goods. Especially since the small masters of the period were continually in conflict with the dominant merchant interests--the masters having made sporadic efforts to gain their own chartered guild--one can easily understand the unwillingness of the merchants on the Court of Assistants to disrupt what was for them a desirable relationship with the small masters. Such a machine could possibly upset the unequal balance of resources upon which merchant domination rested (Unwin, 1957: pp. 103-125).

Besides the fact that the dominant merchant interests in the Clothworkers' Company had little use for technological innovation, there were a number of attributes of Elizabethan social structure which militated against the application of such technical innovation. First, labor-saving machinery could not have saved labor in the situation where journeymen were employed under fixed, long-term contracts protected by the guilds. There had not developed an expropriated labor force that stood in

relation to employers as free labor. Second, those groups who had the capital to invest in such innovations--the merchants--exhibited more interest in maintaining their monopolistic domination and a steady monetary return from it than they did in innovative machinery. Before resources would match incentives, it would take a long process of prior capital accumulation on the part of small masters, and a parallel absorption by merchant capital of disparate small producers (Dobb, 1947: pp. 130-143). It was not until such social structural changes took place after a further period of development that the kinds of relations between social groups and the balance of resources between them concentrated simultaneously the incentives for technological change and the resources and power to apply such changes in the hands of a single group. This was the type of organization towards which Unwin's discussion of the early joint-stock companies of small masters was pointed--a new type of capitalist enterprise where the cleavage of conflict and competition was between an employer who owned capital and a propertyless class of workers who sold labor power. Only when the social structure had approximated this form, and the groups in the productive process stood in this relation to one another, would labor-saving technology be increasingly called upon as a resource by one of these conflicting groups.⁴ Only then did technological innovation have the desirable effects for those groups who applied it. Such changes increased enterprise profitability, but not only through economies of scale; they allowed a gradual consolidation of the industrialist's control over the work process, created unemployment which suppressed wages, and reduced reliance on rela-

tively cohesive and strike-prone skilled laborers (Foster, 1974; Hammond and Hammond, 1920; Shorter and Tilly, 1974). Such technological changes would not have had the same effect in any other network of social relations.

When one roots the impulse towards technological innovation not in free-floating dissatisfactions within an imbalanced social system, but in concrete social groups that stand in specific relations with other groups in the productive process, then it makes little sense to conceive of technological change as an exogenous shock on a system or by its very nature an independent source of social change. In our historical examples, technology appears as an important, albeit intervening variable, the latest in a series of resources brought to bear by specific groups engaged in competition with others in the productive process. To treat it otherwise is to add undue mystification to the process of social change.

E. Summary.

There are, in brief, four major shortcomings in the approach to social change embodied in functionalist theory. First, the explanation is rooted not in concrete social phenomena but in teleological imperatives attributed by the theorist to an abstract model of a self-regulating social system. Second, the choice of the social system as the unit of analysis leads to an inability to account for patterned relations between social systems and for uneven patterns of development. Third, the level of abstraction employed in such a perspective obscures the effect of important aspects of the social structure--particularly group

relations. And fourth, abstracting from these factors can lead to systematic biases in our understanding of other elements--particularly the role of technological change. Each of these shortcomings is shared by what has been over the past decade one of the more important approaches to the study of complex organizations. This approach is found in the vast literature that has sought to relate the organization to its societal environment using a perspective on social phenomena that closely parallels the one criticized above.

II. Complex Organizations and Social Structure

A. The Organization as a Self-Equilibrating System.

One book that reflects such an approach, James Thompson's Organizations in Action (1967) marked something of a watershed in the contemporary field of complex organizations. It was one of the earliest cogent summaries of an approach to the study of organizations that has since dominated the field. This approach was path-breaking in that, for the first time, systematic theories of organization sought not to derive rules for decision-making and control useful to administrators, but to explain observed variations in the ways in which organizations operate and are structured. The distinction between the new approach and the old was, in the language of the field, that between "closed" and "open systems". Where earlier closed systems approaches conceived of an organization as a hermetically sealed arena in which an administrator makes rational decisions, the open systems perspective seeks to go a step further and relate the organization to the societal and technological

environment that has a disturbing effect on organizational rationality (see also Hall, 1972; Perrow, 1967; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967; and Woodward, 1965).

Thompson's conception is appealingly simple. "We will conceive of complex organizations as open systems, hence indeterminate and faced with uncertainty, but at the same time as subject to criteria of rationality and hence needing determinateness and certainty" (Thompson, 1967; p. 10). Since organizations "are expected to produce results, their actions are expected to be reasonable or rational." Uncertainties in the real world, however, have a disruptive effect on the exercise of such rationality, so "the central problem for complex organizations is one of coping with uncertainty" (Thompson, 1967; pp. 1, 13). Once Thompson argues that "technologies and environments are major sources of uncertainty for organizations, and that differences in those dimensions will result in differences in organizations" (Thompson, 1967; p. 13), he has forwarded all the conceptual elements for his general theory of organizational action. Since organizations must deal with uncertainty in order to do their jobs, and since technologies and environments are the primary sources of such uncertainties, the task of a sociology of organizations is to relate patterned variations in environment and technology to differences in "the design, structure, or behavior of organizations" (Thompson, 1967; pp. 161; 115-131). Recently dubbed "neo-Weberian" (Perrow, 1972), this approach has exerted considerable influence. Researchers have occupied themselves for years honing typologies and refining measurement techniques with which to relate structural characteristics of

organizations to technological and environmental conditions (see Harvey, 1968; Pennings, 1975).

Any such approach that seeks to relate an organization to its technological or societal environment carries an implicit statement about the process through which variations in these factors result in variations in organizations. While this aspect of the theory has received little subsequent attention, Thompson initially expressed this central explanatory concept with characteristic clarity.

the complex organization is a set of interdependent parts which together make up a whole because each contributes something and receives something from the whole, which in turn is interdependent with some larger environment. Survival of the system is taken to be the goal, and the parts and their relationships presumably are determined through evolutionary processes. Dysfunctions are conceivable, but it is assumed that an offending part will adjust to produce a net positive contribution or be disengaged, or else the system will degenerate.

Central to the natural-system approach is the concept of homeostasis, or self-stabilization, which spontaneously, or naturally, governs the necessary relationships among parts and activities and thereby keeps the system viable in the face of disturbances stemming from the environment (Thompson, 1967; pp. 6-7).

Organizations, in other words, vary according to differences in environment and technology because they are in some sense self-equilibrating systems, responding adaptively to disruptions of rationality introduced by these factors. Explanations within this organizational perspective are rooted firmly in this notion, complete with its appended teleology, its circularity, and its confusion of description--or perhaps more appropriately correlation--with explanation. To pursue research of the environment and technology of organizations is to implicitly accept some version of this view, for without it one cannot

make claims about the causes of the structure of social relations in organizations. Conversely, without this view technology and environment, so conceived, would not be of such consuming explanatory interest.⁵

B. The Organization as the Unit of Analysis.

Even if one denies the essentially functionalist nature of explanations generated by this approach,⁶ it is still doubtful that the adaptive organization is the most effective unit of analysis in understanding the relationship of the organization with its societal environment. Historical changes in the structure of power and authority within organizations suggest that an organization exists in patterned interdependence with the surrounding social structure, much in the way that a society exists in a systematic relationship with a world system. The focus on the adaptive organizational system diverts attention from such crucial relationships.

An illustration of this kind of relationship is the change described by Stinchcombe in agricultural enterprises in east Germany in a fifty year period ending in the early 20th century. The change of interest is the transition to wage labor on these forced labor estates. This change involved a drastic alteration in dependency relations between landowners and cultivators, and derived directly from changes in the relative power of landed and commercial elites in Germany and in the level of industrial growth in the towns. The initial ability of landed elites east of the Elbe to re-enslave an earlier-freed peasantry and to found agricultural enterprises engaging forced labor for production of

commodity crops depended on two interrelated factors. First, the decline of the volume of trade passing through eastern European towns in the late middle ages, a product of the rising importance of the new maritime trade routes and of west Europe in the emerging world economy, left the towns relatively underdeveloped, both economically and politically (Wallerstein, 1974, pp. 94-112). This relative weakness, secondly, allowed landed elites to assert political and military dominance over the towns and use that dominance to close them as outlets for peasants leaving the estates. This relation between landed and commercial elites enabled landed interests to close off a source of labor loss that had been crucial in eroding west European feudalism (Dobb, 1947, pp. 33-82). With this outlet closed, the landed elites could return to an earlier form of bondage that enabled them to take a position in the emerging world economy as suppliers of grain for the Baltic trade with England and the Netherlands.

The process described by Stinchcombe (1965, pp. 183-185) is that of the final demise of political domination by landed elites with the rapid industrialization of east Germany in the late 19th century. German agricultural laborers on these estates had received housing, garden space, and pasturage from the lord, and had received a share of the grain at harvest. Since the lords also controlled the local administration and courts, the dependency of the laborer was fairly total. This dependency, however, hinged on the ability to keep the cultivator on the land and to restrict alternative sources of employment. The rapid industrialization of Germany during the period, simultaneous with a

shift in relative political power between landed and commercial elites, weakened this ability. German laborers left the land in great numbers, being gradually replaced by Polish and Russian seasonal wage laborers. The beginning of the Weimar Republic saw the organization of these wage laborers into socialist unions, and relations between landowners and cultivators thus become one of bargaining and contract. The decisive factor in this change in power and authority relations between groups in the enterprise was the large-scale change in social structure, which impinged on the agricultural enterprise by undercutting traditional forms of labor control and replacing it with a market of seasonal wage labor.

It is impossible to separate such changes in social structure from the very premises of activity within organizations at any point in history. When one allows historical time to vary, the organization appears as a particularly ill-suited unit of analysis. In order properly to relate an organization to its societal environment, a concrete conception of the organization as a nexus of patterned relationships between groups in society seems crucial. Organizations, as Stinchcombe has pointed out, are the one place in society where different social classes engage in sustained interaction (Stinchcombe, 1965, p. 181). A systematic understanding of the social conditions of the differential distribution of resources to these groups confronting one another in an organization would be a distinct advantage in understanding the organized activity that this distribution shapes.

C. Levels of Abstraction.

The critique of the adaptive organization as a unit of analysis in exploring this relationship between an organization and society is simultaneously a critique of the concepts that accompany such a unit. The concepts used in the environment-technology approach are at such a level of abstraction that they obscure the direct interrelation between aspects of social structure and activities within organizations. A similar frustration with the overabstraction of such a perspective led Zald and Berger recently to comment "Organizations exist not only in environments (the "in" thing to study these days); they exist in society" (Zald and Berger, 1978, p. 825). The concept "environment", in other words, passes over too much that is important in the concrete complexity of an organization's relation with broader social processes. Such overabstraction is a distinct liability for a perspective claiming to relate an organization to its societal environment--even more so for a perspective that often seeks to derive explanations of distributions of discretion and power within organizations (see Thompson, 1967, pp. 115-116).

For Thompson and those sharing similar perspectives, the societal environment is composed of elements that affect an organization only to the extent that they present uncertainties for the rational pursuit of its tasks. Our examples of historical change have repeatedly shown, however, that organizational relations with society are much more fundamental and direct--relations which simultaneously shape the nature of the "task"

whose rational pursuit is purportedly the premise of an organization's relations with society in the first place. The evolution of Unwin's guilds, for example, was a process of continuous conflict between different productive groups. The varying resources these groups could bring to bear at different periods had a direct relation not only on power and authority relations within the organization but also was a key factor in determining what task the guild would pursue. This does not mean, as some might be tempted to conclude, that different concepts and types of explanation are appropriate for studying organizational change than for organizational structure. On the contrary, it indicates that any perspective or set of concepts which abstracts from social groups and from processes of change, and which pursues purely cross-sectional questions, runs the risk of an incomplete understanding of the social processes that are the object of inquiry.

Variations over historical time in characteristics of guild organizations cannot be accounted for at a level of abstraction that excludes a concrete conception of social structure. The transition from the guild as an association of craftsmen for the mutual exclusion of external competition to an organization in which merchant elements came to dominate small masters and journeymen in a quasi-employer role involved both a shift in the internal structure of the guild and a change in the organization's "task". This change depended on the development of markets, the one-sided accumulation of profits from this source by a specific group, and differential access by merchant

and producing elements to the political power (Parliament, the Crown) that would enforce the differing claims of disputing groups.⁷ It involved a gradual accretion to the merchant element of decision-making authority vis-a-vis the journeyman producer, and a differential distribution of tasks within the organization, as one element became concerned increasingly with purely productive tasks, and the other both with marketing and with directing productive activity--for example, regulating the supply of raw materials to the various producers, and directing the finished products into a central storehouse (Unwin, 1957: pp. 103-125).

Understanding historical variations in the level of specialization, the shape of the division of labor, and the distribution of power and authority within the guild organization, in other words, requires a concrete conception of Tudor and Stuart social structure--particularly of different productive groups, their relations with one another, and the resources--both political and economic--to which they had access. Such a perspective is equally vital for explaining differences between guild organizations at any given point in time. Those newly-chartered guilds which were the fruit of the small masters' successful struggle to free themselves of merchant domination differed in the "task" pursued and in internal structure from other guilds where the same process had not been successfully completed. Such patterned variations cannot be understood apart from the different range of social groups represented in the respective organizations and the consequently differing kinds of social relations in each.

D. Some Consequences of Abstracting from Social Groups

The abstract conception of the self-equilibrating organization can lead, by what it excludes, to a truncated understanding of those factors it does include. This is the case even more so than for the parallel shortcoming in some theories of development, since technology in this organizational perspective plays such an important explanatory role. The ability of those within this perspective to uncover systematic variations in technology and structure in cross-sectional research has trapped many in the illusion that technology is in some fundamental sense a major independent determinant of the distribution of power, authority, and other organizational characteristics.⁸ Kerr's perspective, stated in Industrialism and Industrial Man, is only the most straightforward expression of such a view. Without a clear conception of the interplay between technology and social structure as both have developed together historically, technology itself takes on the appearance of an autonomous determining force. Examination of historical, rather than largely cross-sectional variation, however, reveals that such a view is the result of the simultaneous limitations of an overabstracted conception of the organization and of the restricted kinds of variation observable over cross sections at any single point in time. When one no longer abstracts from the relations and conflicts between distinct social groups and observes variations in these factors over historical time, technology appears less as an independent force and more as an integral part of ongoing social processes.

This amended view of technology is based on two separate arguments. First, changes in social structure--specifically in the relations between productive groups--have been historical preconditions for the adoption of specific forms of technology. Our historical examples have suggested that the implementation of labor-saving technologies was contingent on the development of specific characteristics of the social structure. The dominant groups in the productive process had to have both sufficient resources and incentives to apply labor-saving machinery. This required both a prior accumulation of capital and a network of market relations that allowed producers to take advantage of increased output per labor input. But perhaps more importantly, the implementation of such machinery required some prior domination of one group over much of the production process, some earlier separation of productive roles, a previous breakdown of guild restrictions, and the development of a specific wage relation between employer and employee. Without these preconditions either there would be little advantage in implementing labor-saving technology or there would be institutionalized opposition with the power to prevent its application.

Secondly, given the fact that certain social relations are both temporally and logically prior to the implementation of specific forms of productive technology, how do we assess the autonomous effect of technology itself, independent of the network of social relations in which it is enmeshed? It is difficult, granted, to ignore the sheer material presence of technology. Physical technologies, especially in production, lay out

a grid of patterned interactions among workers and set real limits on workers' control over their own activities (Blauner, 1964). This undeniable physical presence of technology is not at issue here. If it were otherwise, how could technology be a resource used by specific groups to transform their relations with other groups in the organization?

The real difficulty comes when we move from these straightforward observations to causal arguments about the social impact of technology. The argument that social arrangements in production organizations are the product of dictates intrinsic to modern technology is not completely undermined by drawing attention to socio-historical preconditions. Temporal priority, after all, is not the same as causal importance. We must remember, however, that those characteristics of social structure that serve as historical preconditions to the implementation of certain technologies continue to exist, and continue to endow inanimate techniques with the ability to "cause" social relations. Labor saving machinery, for example, required prior to its implementation in early capitalist manufacturing an expropriated force of formally free laborers, prior accumulation of capital in the hands of nascent industrialists, and a commodity market that allowed those who organized production freely to engage in trade. While these machines consolidated the industrialists' control over the work process, its pace, and knowledge about production--thus greatly transforming authority relations within the enterprise--the original historical preconditions were never undermined and continued to make the entire social process of produc-

tion possible.

Here, then, is the core of a difficult conceptual problem: since the use of such labor-saving machinery continues to be based on those same aspects of social structure that were the historical preconditions for their emergence, is technology then the cause of types of authority relations in organizations or is it an artifact--a physical expression of underlying social relations in the larger society? In an historical sense--recognizing both the social conditions that underlie the implementation of certain technologies and the undeniable material presence of these physical techniques, once implemented--it is clearly both. Material characteristics of technology, therefore, do have a profound effect on social relations. But this important impact is not an autonomous one--these technological characteristics cannot exert an influence unless the said technology is chosen by groups in a position to do so. This choice, in turn, is profoundly shaped by the relations of these groups with others in the production process. And the success of their implementation depends in large measure on a preexisting imbalance of resources available to one or the other groups and on a continuing maintenance of the relations this imbalance shapes. Consequently when people stress the causal impact of technology, they often have in mind the result of the choice of a certain type of technology within this entire social process. Yet the use of the term "technology" typically stresses, either implicitly or explicitly, the consequences of this choice as if it were a dictate inherent in the characteristics of technology itself. Unless we grasp both halves of this conceptual problem--the

material impact of technology, once implemented, and the social conditions that underlie its implementation--we will agglomerate under the term "technology" a number of effects which in fact spring from social sources. Technology intervenes between characteristics of social structure and patterned relationships within organizations. It has been, specifically, a potent resource called upon by certain groups in the production process to further transform that process in a desired direction. Historically, this has entailed a parallel transformation of relations of authority and domination between social groups.

An historical perspective requires us, therefore, to be cautious about the kind of theoretical implications we draw from cross-sectional research that uncovers a relation between technology and aspects of organizational structure. It is no easy task to begin to separate in theory, much less empirically, the ways in which these relationships are only outward manifestations of underlying, causally prior sets of social relations and resource distributions between groups, from the ways in which physical technology does indeed have in some sense an autonomous influence. Much confusion will be avoided, however, if we recognize the inherent limitations of abstracting from social structure and historical change, and limit our theoretical inferences accordingly. Perrow (1967) is rather unique in this literature for warning against this very type of confusion. His argument makes clear that variations in technology are to explain variations in the effectiveness of different approaches to management--not in some absolute historical sense the deter-

mining effect of technology on social relations in organizations (Perrow, 1967, p. 195). These are clearly two different issues and require different theoretical and methodological approaches. To address the second issue requires an historical approach with concepts grounded in concrete social groups and relations.

E. Summary.

The four major shortcomings we attributed to functionalist theories of social change and development have a parallel expression in theories that seek to relate complex organizations to their technologies and societal environments. First, despite the apparent emphasis on environment and technology, the explanation is rooted not in concrete social phenomena but in imperatives attributed to the organization as a self-adjusting entity, constantly tending towards rationality. Second, the choice of the self-adjusting organization as the unit of analysis leads to an inattention to the direct and fundamental relations that an organization has with its surrounding social structure. Third, the level of abstraction characteristic of such a perspective obscures the fundamental importance of aspects of the social structure--particularly group relations--in accounting for important structural characteristics of organizations. Fourth, obscuring such factors can lead to a peculiarly ahistorical, almost asocial conception of technology as an autonomous determining influence on patterns of social relations in organizations. These shortcomings are compounded by an approach that is predominantly cross-sectional--one that greatly limits the types of variation one can observe and makes theoretical con-

clusions about the causes of patterns of social relations in organizations intrinsically hazardous. A more effective approach to the sociology of organizations--particularly one that seeks to relate patterns of organization to the societal environment--would have to begin by examining historical as well as cross-sectional variation. Such an approach, further, in seeking historical variation, would begin with an emphasis on concrete social groups and on empirical manifestations of the relations between them--not with an abstract model of a functional system or with a reified conception of organizational structure.

III. Elements of an Historical Sociology of Organizations

A. The Social Nature of an Organization.

To properly understand the relations between an organization and the surrounding social structure, we must begin with a unit of analysis that allows us to root our explanations in concrete social phenomena, rather than in our preconceived notions of the inherent tendencies of a self-regulating entity. The reified notion of the organization must be pulled apart into the smaller units that this notion obscures. These new units, in turn, must be of a sort that can provide this more direct bridge with social structure. Each of our historical examples has portrayed the organization as a nexus of differing groups standing in specific relationships to one another and ostensibly engaged in directed activity. These examples, further, have suggested that historical explanation flows more convincingly from an analysis that takes these groups, and not the site of their interaction, as the focal unit of analysis. Groups

react, compete, engage in conflict and structure relationships between themselves. Organizations do not exhibit any such tendencies apart from the actual social groups that comprise them--indeed, an organization has no social existence apart from these groups.

There are two distinct, yet overlapping criteria for distinguishing groups within organizations. The first is social class--the distinctions between groups within an organization that derive from the positions of these groups in a historically specific social formation analogous to Marx's concept "mode of production". The second criteria is organizational function or role--the distinctions between groups within an organization that derive not from the positions of these groups in society generally but solely from the positions they occupy within the organization. While these two kinds of criteria are surely related, the degree to which they overlap varies greatly both across types of organizations and through historical time. In some organizations, important class distinctions may be almost completely absent--modern governmental bureaucracies, and university and hospital administrations are well-studied examples that spring immediately to mind. In these organizations distinctions between groups derive solely from the types of roles filled or functions performed in an organization. In other organizations, class and organizational role may coincide almost completely. This is especially clear in the feudal demesne (Bloch, 1961: pp. 241-292) and in such agricultural enterprises as plantations and commercial haciendas (Paige, 1975: pp. 139-210; Stinchcombe, 1961).⁹ Still other organizations have exhibited an historical

development that has greatly altered the relative importance of these two types of group distinctions. The unembellished class distinctions of the early capitalist manufacturing enterprise, for example, have been progressively overlaid with myriad distinctions of skill, remuneration, and seniority (Edwards, Gordon, and Reich, 1975).

Two general factors, therefore, distinguish groups within organizations, one deriving from position in social structure and the other from position in organizational structure. The salience of one or the other factor varies widely along a continuum that ranges from total correspondence of class and function to total absence of differing classes. Most of this continuum is composed of organizations where these different group distinctions overlap.¹⁰

B. Concepts.

Once we have identified groups within organizations as the focal unit of analysis, a different set of concepts is necessary than for the conception of the self-regulating organization. These concepts will help provide an explanatory scheme that will allow us to begin to trace in a more specific and complex fashion the direct relations between social activity in organizations and the social structure in which an organization exists.

1. Group Relations. To the two types of group distinctions in organizations correspond two distinct, yet interrelated dimensions of social relations: authority and domination. Authority refers to the relations between groups in an organization that are separated by functional role. Authority relations denote the ability of a group within an organization to ensure

compliance with their decisions about organized activity by having their decisions enforced by other functionaries in the organization (Gamson, 1968, pp. 21-28). Such authority derives from the structure of the organization itself, and not from a group's position in the social structure. Much of what is referred to as "structure" in the organizational literature is merely a reified conception of these authority relations. Levels of hierarchy, spans of control, degrees of specialization, and extent of worker discretion are all different ways of thinking about the parcelling out of decision-making authority in a complex organization and the ways of tying these parcels to a higher coordinating authority.

Domination is the label given to those relations between the groups in an organization that are defined by social class. Domination refers, quite apart from decision-making authority in an organization's activities, to the power of one social class to get another to do its bidding through the kinds of pressures it can bring to bear on the other classes represented in the organization. While foremen's decisions are complied with by virtue of the authority accruing to their position in the organization, feudal lords enforced their decisions by virtue of their social domination of the serfs. In the first case, the relationship derives from organizational structure, in the second, from the larger social structure.

This class domination can take many forms. Some of the more obvious forms are reflected in the more direct kinds of coercion--administrative, political, or military--that one class is able to call upon in order to dominate another. But the

more important forms of domination are less visible because they form a normal part of life in organizations. Property ownership is one source of domination that has been historically important. Forms of labor discipline, often related to different forms of property ownership, have ranged from the bondage of chattel slavery, to the legal domination of lord over serf, and to the formally free laborer who contracts for the sale of labor power. In this last case, domination varies according to the degree that buyers of labor power are able to dominate the market for labor, and according to the way in which payment for labor power is rendered. When there is a pool of surplus labor (assuming no combinations of workers), the sanction of firing becomes more powerful and employer domination increases; when labor of a certain kind is scarce relative to demand, domination by employers decreases. Similarly, domination over laborers is highest in truck or company-town systems, while weekly cash payment reduces this form of domination.

Domination of one group over another in an organization often rests on the ability of one group to restrict alternative sources of livelihood for another. Thus the domination of medieval lord over serf hinged on the ability to prevent the serf from fleeing to towns. The domination of the merchant over the journeyman in Elizabethan guilds was based in part on the ability of the merchant to monopolize market outlets for the craftsman's goods. The domination of merchant capital in the towns over cottage weavers, similarly, was less complete than that of the early capitalist employer the industrial working class because the worker had lost alternative sources of live-

lihood that the weaver possessed--a garden plot and ownership of some, albeit small, means of production. Domination, in other words, is a dimension of group relations within organizations that is distinct from the authority relations which preoccupy the attention of most organization theory. Since relations of domination, clearly, are based upon a differential distribution of varying types of political and economic resources to social classes in an organization, they are more directly related to the social structure from which these resources derive.

Organizations vary in the relative importance of authority and domination in understanding the social life that is carried on within them. While the structure of authority within a feudal demesne is almost entirely reducible to patterns of domination, authority relations within a modern hospital administration derive directly from the structure of the organization itself, relatively independent of patterns of domination in the surrounding class structure. To the extent that functional group distinctions predominate in an organization, authority relations will be independent of class domination. To the extent that class distinctions are salient, authority relations and class domination will be closely related.

Thus while patterns of organizational authority and class domination are analytically distinguishable, they exist in a variable relationship with one another. It is clear that in many cases there has been a close historical interaction between the two dimensions of group relations as they have changed over time. The loss of the weavers' authority over the work process

was part and parcel of their gradual subjugation, impoverishment, and expropriation by emerging merchant-industrial capital (Hammond and Hammond, 1920; Thompson, 1966; pp. 189-349). This involved the creation of new forms of domination, with the weaver owning neither means of production nor raw materials, and depending solely on a wage income in a labor market chronically glutted with unemployed. This shift in relations of domination was accompanied by a shift in authority relations that saw decisions about production and distribution being concentrated gradually into the hands of the industrialists or their hired administrators (Pollard, 1965; pp. 32-47).

This connection between authority and domination, however, is by no means straightforward. Capitalist manufacturing enterprises, which have experienced a continual multiplication of functional role distinctions, have generally exhibited a growing separation of authority relations from patterns of class domination. Authority relations have become progressively less reducible to domination. One of the more fascinating points made in Foster's account of industrial conflict in Oldham is that additional authority was actually delegated to certain of the workers in order to maintain existing relations of domination. In this case, Foster (1974; pp. 210-235) argues, a more skilled sector of the labor force was effectively made an agent of industrialists and placed in authority as foremen over the rest of the workforce. The resulting divergences of interest and political perception between the two groups in the labor force--distinguished along functional lines--effectively split

what appears to have been a unified, class conscious local labor movement. Edwards, Gordon, and Reich (1975; pp. xi-xxi; 3-26) have similarly argued that the proliferation of differentiated jobs and complex wage hierarchies at the turn of the twentieth century were part of the strategy of American industrialists to defuse the class distinctions that had begun to spawn a politicized, class-conscious union movement. These historical examples suggest that the distribution of authority within organizations may in some cases be a direct response to forms of conflict around relations of domination--a response intended to maintain that domination. A major task of historical research is to unravel the changing relationship between structures of authority and domination in organizations--the relationship, in other words, between organizational structure and class structure.

2. Conflict. Conflict is rooted in specific forms of group relations in organizations. While for writers like Dahrendorf (1959) such conflict takes place over the distribution of authority between groups in corporate bodies, it is probably more accurate to think of conflict as centering also around what we have termed relations of domination. Dahrendorf's theory, by directing attention solely towards the dimension we have termed authority relations, severs, as some have argued, the connections between conflict and more concrete conceptions of social structure and group interests (Giddens, 1975; p. 183). By specifying the source of conflict not solely as the distribution of authority within the organization but

also as specific forms of domination in society, we are able to retain this link with social structure while at the same time drawing attention to a neglected dimension of group relations that would seem to be closely tied to forms of conflict.

Conflict centers around issues of authority or domination to the degree that functional or class distinctions are salient in the organization. Conflict between the personnel department and the budgeting department in a hospital administration revolves around issues of authority--over the enforcement of conflicting decisions made by each. Where class distinctions are salient, and where they are relatively unencumbered by cross-cutting functional distinctions, conflict occurs over issues of domination, despite the frequent appearance that it is spurred by issues of authority. Judging by our historical examples, in such cases conflict centers on authority relations only insofar as these are directly tied to specific forms of domination. The domination of merchant interests over the small masters in the Elizabethan guilds, for example, gave rise to conflict first over maintenance of craft guild rules, and then over the small masters' secession to form their own organization. The underlying issue was always the domination of the merchant interest over the small masters. While changes in authority relations were also involved--specifically the ability of the small masters to regulate craft standards and participate more directly in the overall direction of production--it was not

authority per se that was at issue but the underlying relations of domination to which these authority relations were tied.

The later domination of early industrialists over expropriated workers, on the other hand, was based on the ability of industrialists to dominate a labor market chronically glutted with a labor surplus. In early capitalist enterprises class distinctions were still almost synonymous with functional distinctions, and authority relations paralleled closely those of domination. Conflict around this form of domination thus came at one point in history to center on the ability of workers to combine into unions, artificially restrict the labor market, and thus strengthen their relative position in that market--and at the same time their position vis a vis the industrialist. This particular form of conflict involved nothing less than an effort by workers to undermine the basis of the type of domination that allowed the industrialist relatively free reign over compensation, working conditions, and job tenure. It is precisely to prevent such conflict over class domination, many have argued, that spurred the defusing of domination issues by introducing new functional distinctions that cut across class lines (Stone, 1975).

Conflict is not simply directed towards issues of domination in such organizations--the form of conflict varies according to forms of domination. Paige's (1975, pp. 4-71) theory of rural class conflict in essence relates forms of conflict in different types of agricultural enterprise to the varying types of political and economic domination that non-

cultivating classes exercise over cultivators in each. Whether noncultivator domination is based on ownership of capital or land, and whether these class relations are based on commodity market, wage, or coercive political relations, makes a decisive contribution to the shape of agrarian social movements. In commercial haciendas, for example, where noncultivator domination is based on control of land and of coercive political force, conflict takes the form of an agrarian revolt, often characterized by peasant land occupations. On plantations, on the other hand, where noncultivator domination is based on ownership of capital and an advantageous position in a rural market for wage labor, conflict takes the form of a labor movement directed not at control of land but at wage reform. In each case, conflict centers around the sources of noncultivator domination.

While conflict is shaped by existing group relations in organizations--particularly relations of domination--the outcome of any particular conflict simultaneously shapes forms of authority and domination. Foster's account of industrial conflict in Oldham specified a particular shift in authority relations--the delegation of authority to a stratum of the work force--as a consequence of chronic labor unrest. Unwin's account of the evolution of British guilds, similarly, specified the changes in forms of domination between productive classes that flowed from the constant conflicts within each successive version of the guilds. Paige's account of conflict in Peruvian haciendas, further, showed that a successful challenge to noncultivator

domination resulted in the emergence of small-holding agricultural systems. To specify such a reciprocal relationship, however, is not to explain changes in group relations in organizations. A final factor must be added to the equation--deriving from the surrounding social structure--which decisively weighs the outcome of conflicts and thus shapes group relations in organizations.

3. Resources. The distinctions between functional and social groups, between organizational authority and class domination, and the references to conflict over these different types of social relations have been made for the purpose of relating organizational to social structure. Resources provide us with our final conceptual link between social activity in organizations and the surrounding social structure. Resources similarly can be distinguished according to whether they derive from the organization itself or from the surrounding social structure. Organizational resources are the kind most familiar to organizational sociologists: access to funds, information, communication channels, and institutionalized means of enforcing compliance with decisions. These resources are available to groups in organizations on the basis of their functional role positions. To the degree that class distinctions are synonymous with functional distinctions in an organization, organizational resources will be synonymous with another dimension of resources: those that derive from the broader society.¹¹ This second range of resources are available to groups in organizations on the basis of their position in the class structure. The mobilization of either

type of resource is an important determinant of the outcome of conflicts--and thus the course of change--in organizations.

This second range of resources is the one that is critical in linking structures of authority in organizations to historical changes in social structure. Large scale changes in social structure shift the availability of a wide range of resources to classes represented in an organization. These resources are any variety of social or material factors which can be brought to bear on class relations--for the purpose either of changing or maintaining them. This can include simple property ownership, recourse to a large pool of liquid assets, access to organized means of coercion, and even possession of skills or education--all of which can be used to maintain or change existing relations.

Control over various factors of production--land, labor, capital--is a prime example of a kind of resource crucial in shaping group relations, the availability of which shifts with large-scale changes in social structure. Craft guilds in England were able to prevent still further domination of merchants over craftsmen, for example, through their ability to control the supply of skilled labor in towns. This guild control over the labor supply was eroded in the face of decisive changes in rural social structure--the enclosure movements--which served to create an alternative rural network of artisan labor (notably spinning and weaving) and at the same time a proletarianized labor force to which merchant capital could turn. This loss of control by urban guilds allowed owners of

merchant capital to further dominate craftsmen--a market domination which led gradually to the expropriation and proletarianization of the labor force (Dobb, 1947; pp. 123-176). Subsequent efforts would be made by propertyless laborers to reduce their domination by industrialists by forming unions that exerted a control over labor similar to that exercised by earlier guilds.

Resources are not merely funneled by historical changes in social structure to different groups in an organization. These same groups must make efforts to mobilize these historically-available resources before they can bring them to bear on changing or maintaining group relations. In the Tudor guilds, for example, the mobilization of two types of resources loomed as crucial in the conflict between merchant and producing interests over maintaining/changing the domination of the former over the latter. First was access to legal sanctions by the crown. Much of the conflict between the two groups found expression in legal pleas by small masters to enforce often-ignored guild regulations by themselves inspecting goods. When such legal sanctions failed, small masters attempted to get at the root of merchant domination by arguing for separate crown charters for their own guilds. When in some cases these charters were granted, the small masters acquired a resource decisive in breaking away from merchant domination. A second decisive resource in this process was access to sufficient collective funds for the small masters to themselves buy, stockpile, and regulate the distribution

of finished goods. This monetary resource had been monopolized by merchant interests by virtue of their domination over the producers on the market. In order to break away from this domination (and simultaneously convince the Crown that a new charter could yield monetary returns to the treasury), small masters had to mobilize funds from their own ranks and from elites interested in venturesome investment. One way to mobilize this second decisive kind of resource was through the formation of the earliest joint-stock companies.

One of the clearest historical examples of the use of socially-derived resources to transform authority relations between groups in an organization is the initial implementation of labor-saving technologies in early capitalist enterprises. Two major problems confronting early industrialists were their inability, in a situation where many independent work operations were housed in a single shed, to regulate the speed and quality of the work performed (Pollard, 1965), and their reliance on a skilled, cohesive group of relatively strike-prone workers to perform these independent production tasks (Shorter and Tilly, 1974, pp. 194-235). Industrialists needed to extend their organizational authority over the work process while at the same time augmenting their social domination of the labor force. These early industrialists were able to tap the capital they had accumulated by virtue of their social position in production, invest it in new kinds of technology, and turn these machines to the task of changing their relations with labor in order to achieve

their desired productive ends. This technology allowed industrialists, first of all, to transform authority relations in the production organization so that they would possess more authority over the act of production itself--especially over the speed and intensity of labor. As part of this process, knowledge about the production process itself passed also into industrialist hands, further cementing this authority. These were formerly aspects of the work process over which the skilled craft worker had control. Such mechanical changes, secondly, helped augment the domination of industrialist over laborer by lowering the skill requirements of an individual task and thus widening the potential labor market (Braverman, 1974, pp. 124-248). Widening the potential labor market helped break earlier, violence-prone combinations of skilled workers, not to mention the simultaneous effect of depressing wages. Labor-saving technology, just as was access to military and legal repression, was a resource brought to bear by industrialists in their relations with labor.¹²

B. The Study of Historical Change in Organizations.

The variation that is typically observable in cross-sectional research does not provide sufficient leverage to understand structures of authority in organizations and their relationship with social structure. The factors we have stressed as most important in this task can be seen to covary only over historical time. Such historical variation, further, does not array itself into a series of cross-sections, but presents itself to us as processes of transformation and change. Since many of the propositions we are interested in imply relationships between

several factors over time, only evidence of change over time can verify or falsify these propositions. A new approach to the sociology of organizations, therefore, should take the study of such processes of historical transformation as the focal point for investigating the relationships between the concepts outlined above.

Historical research is vital for two other reasons. First, historically-situated analyses help specify and control for those large-scale societal processes that so vitally affect the organizational processes we are interested in. Such an historically-situated analysis is found in Barrington Moore's Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy (1966). By rooting his analysis of modern political transformation in the historically unique agrarian class structures of various nation-states, Moore was able to undercut a number of less specific generalizations about political modernization. An identical approach is used in Charles Tilly's The Vendée (1964). By situating his analysis of the counterrevolution of 1793 in the varying class relations and processes of industrialization and urbanization in separate areas of southern Anjou, Tilly was similarly able to challenge previous generalizations about the relationship of politics and social change. From our own perspective, organizational analysis must be specific about historically-situated social structures precisely because these larger structures have an important, if variable impact on organizational processes.

Historically-situated analyses are vital, secondly, because historically-specific processes change the functioning of organizations to such an extent that they influence the applicability

of the very concepts with which many have set about to study organizations. A central concept linking environmental variation to organizational structure in a systems perspective is the notion "efficiency" (Yuchtman and Seashore, 1967). In order for the optimum structure to be fit to the environment, as specified in this line of theory, some rational ways of detecting and calculating costs and benefits must come into play before "efficiency" can act to select structural arrangements. Perhaps the major message of Weber's historical analysis of the rise of formal rationality, however, is that such systematic calculation was part of an historically-specific process--the development of Western capitalism. It is much less appropriate, for example, to think of authority structures in a slave plantation as deriving from their societal environment through the medium of efficiency. These authority structures sprang largely from the planter class domination of the slaves--a class relation which greatly restricted the organizational forms feasible in the agricultural enterprise.¹³ The slave plantation was governed less by internal calculation of the efficient use of resources than by a notion that has been called "effectiveness"--the achievement of a desired outcome (a certain crop yield) within a broad range of tolerable internal costs (see Tilly, 1978; p. 116). The historical variability of so vital a linking concept as efficiency/effectiveness is ample reason for analyzing organizations only in relation to larger, historically-situated social processes.

Several kinds of historical processes seem particularly

strategic for understanding the relationship between social structure and relations of authority and domination in organizations. One approach would be to trace the process of historical change in relations between social groups in a certain kind of organization. This is the kind of approach hinted at in Stinchcombe's outline of changes in dependency relations in east German agricultural enterprises. Here group relations in an organization can be seen to vary as large-scale changes in social structure shift the resources available to different groups. A second approach would take historical changes not in relations between groups but in the "task" of a certain type of organization as that which is to be explained. The evolution of the nature of guilds from craft associations to organizations in which merchant interests exercised domination over small producers is an example of such an historical process. Here large-scale changes in social structure can be seen to tilt resources to groups in a certain type of organization such that one group succeeds in changing the organization into one of an entirely different type. A third approach would be to examine those social structural conditions that favor the historical emergence or extinction of a particular kind of organization. This is one of the oldest issues in sociology; an issue which has spurred the analyses of both Weber (1964; pp. 158-319) and Marx (1967; I; pp. 723-49; III; pp. 593-613; 782-813; 1973; pp. 456-515) of the social conditions that eroded the feudal demesne and spurred the formation of capitalist enterprises. Nowhere, as these authors recognized, could the links between social structure and relations of authority and

domination in organizations be clearer than when tracing the social preconditions for the historical creation of new forms of organization.

This emphasis on historical change should not be taken as a denial of the reality or importance of the kinds of cross-sectional variations due to technology and environment uncovered by such writers as Blauner (1964), Stinchcombe (1959), and by those within a systems perspective. The claim, rather, is that these factors should be incorporated not into a conception of a self-equilibrating system but into a conception of group relations and conflicts within organizations. The central argument of this essay has been that the kinds of theoretical conclusions we draw from such cross-sectional variation will be greatly altered by a perspective which admits the existence of groups and conflicts and which enriches our understanding by observing variation also over historical time. This emphasis on concrete instances of historical change, further, should not be interpreted as a denial that generalization is desirable or possible. This is, rather, an argument about rules for deriving sociological generalizations.¹⁴ While systematic analysis is much more difficult to perform on often-crude historical materials, such material is often more important for pursuing the questions we are interested in than is the more readily-analyzable kind available in contemporary cross-sections (see Tilly, 1970; pp. 438-45). While surely more difficult, the systematic gathering and analysis of historical data has already proven both possible and highly fruitful in the fields of demography (Wrigley,

1969) and social conflict (Tilly, Tilly, and Tilly, 1975).
An historical sociology of organizations is no less possible.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 My thanks to William Gamson, Charles Tilly, and Mayer Zald for their critical remarks on an earlier draft of this essay.
- 2 Arthur Stinchcombe (1978, pp. 7-13) makes a related criticism of Smelser's method. Like many conscious efforts to apply theory to history, he argues, Smelser's book has a densely theoretical introduction and conclusion, while what comes in between is in essence an historical narrative that uses the language of the theory to describe the events.
- 3 When Landes turns to explain why technological innovation of this sort was centered in west Europe, he probes little further than Smelser into the structures of social relations and conflicts around them that accompanied these innovations. The freer level of economic activity in that region had the effect of "multiplying points of creativity" (1969, p. 19). The fragmentation of Europe into nation-states, further, spurred technological growth because new technologies (presumably guns and sails) could be used as a weapon in interstate competition (1969, pp. 31-32). Finally, after a discussion of west Europe's religious and intellectual history, Landes argues: "The will to mastery, the rational approach to problems that we call the scientific method, the competition for wealth and power--together these broke down the resistance of inherited ways and made of change a positive good". Why, therefore, technological change? Relatively high aggregate supply of innovations (multiplied points of creativity), a sustained demand (from the state), and a favorable value system. There is, then, far less concern with specifying the

impact of group relations on technological change than with the opposite relationship. The unfortunate theoretical consequence of stressing only one side of this relation, as will be argued below, is that the inanimate characteristics of technology receive exaggerated attention.

4 This, of course, is only that aspect of social structure most directly related to the groups within it. Another aspect of the social structure that encouraged technological innovation was the development of relatively free markets where the capitalist manufacturer entered the marketplace directly as a seller. Innovation for productive purposes was of little interest, as the Clothworkers' Court of Assistants testified, where a merchant sought only to reap a stable rate of return from a monopolistic position and used that position to mediate between the producing masters and the market. Within the existing network of market relations between productive groups, the economic incentives for innovation simply did not yet exist.

5 Some might object to this claim, countering that in this field we have not a concept of a self-equilibrating organizational system but a theory of how rational administrators make decisions about their organizations based on a set of contingent factors. This objection changes little the nature of the explanation. To specify administrators as those who perform the adaptations does not change the fact that all rational administrators are asserted to act in this way or that all organizations must adapt to disruptions in the same manner.

6 Thompson reveals Parsons' central influence on the approach

he develops in a footnote to two essays on formal organizations in Structure and Process in Modern Societies (1960, pp. 16-96).

An examination of Parsons' presentation yields an approach based on premises identical to that of Thompson.

7 The merchant elements within such craft guilds, for example, needed state permission to engage in trade--an act which encroached on other previously chartered monopolies. Producers, on the other hand, often brought suit to enforce guild regulations--for example the prohibition of the export of undyed cloth--that had been ignored by merchant elements

8 The concept "technology" in the organizational literature is often envisaged in such a way that it includes aspects of the entire social process of production which accompanies it. Note, for example, the popular distinctions between continuous flow, assembly, and small batch production--the prototypical "technology" variable. Technology here, however, is used in a narrower, more concrete sense--the actual physical apparatus and the technique it embodies.

9 Stinchcombe presents different forms of agricultural enterprise as "producing" varying kinds of rural class relations (1961, p. 175). It makes little sense, however, to conceive of enterprises as giving rise to specific class structures since, as we have argued above, specific forms of organization become possible only given the prior development of specific forms of class relations. In an historical sense, Stinchcombe misstates his case. Such relations within the enterprise, however, can be seen as a basis of existing class relations

since, after these enterprises come into existence, they are the place where the class structure is continually reinforced. With the demise of a particular kind of enterprise, as Stinchcombe correctly argues, new kinds of class relations emerge. There is thus a dense interrelationship between class relations and activity within production organizations and, once the organization appears on the historical scene, it is difficult to specify one-way causality.

10 The degree to which one or the other distinctions influences the actual behavior of groups is another issue. It is towards the analysis of such questions that these distinctions are offered.

11 Generally speaking, these two types of resources will be more closely associated--as will class position and functional role--in organizations where production takes place. This association is closest in production organizations because class structures are rooted in the key production organizations that define them. As Weber has argued, however, this association has been weakened with the historical development of formally rational economic calculation and routinized decision making. Weber felt that the authority structures that derived from such formal rationality would henceforth be immune to changes in social structure--particularly to the socialization of the economy (Weber 1964, pp. 211-218).

12 The crucial nature of technology as a resource in this conflict over changing group relations was no mystery to contemporaries. The political economist Andrew Ure saw a new

automatic mule as "a creation destined to restore order among the industrious classes" (quoted in Engels 1973, p. 260).

13 One could even argue that, rather than the plantation organization adjusting to environmental contingencies, aspects of the climate and soil, in relation to the culture of certain crops currently in demand on the world market, restricted those environmental conditions where a slave system could maintain an economic existence (see David, et al 1976, pp. 202-223, 339-357). To say that the organizational notion of "efficiency" is not applicable to slave plantations, however, is not to enter into the controversy over the profitability or economic efficiency of slave plantations (see Fogel and Engerman 1974). It is merely to assert that other considerations besides the internal calculation of the use of resources were more important in setting structures of authority relations within these southern agricultural enterprises. Chief among these factors was the peculiar relationship between planter and slave (see Genovese 1967, Stamp 1956).

14 Stinchcombe, in his recent Theoretical Methods in Social History, forwards more fully a methodological position resonant with the arguments presented here.

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