

## Social Structure and Anomie (1938)

[. . .] The conceptual framework set out in this essay is designed to provide a systematic approach to the analysis of social and cultural sources of deviant behavior. Our primary aim is to discover how some *social structures exert a definite pressure upon certain persons in the society to engage in nonconformist rather than conformist conduct*. If we can locate groups peculiarly subject to such pressures, we should expect to find fairly high rates of deviant behavior in these groups, not because the human beings comprising them are compounded of distinctive biological tendencies but because they are responding normally to the social situation in which they find themselves. Our perspective is sociological. We look at variations in the *rates* of deviant behavior, not at its specific incidence. Should our quest be at all successful, some forms of deviant behavior will be found to be as psychologically normal as conformist behavior, and the equation of deviation and abnormality will be put in question.

### Patterns of Cultural Goals and Institutional Norms

Among the several elements of social and cultural structures, two are of immediate importance. These are analytically separable although they merge in concrete situations. The first consists of culturally defined goals, purposes, and interests, held out as legitimate objectives for all or for diversely located members of the society. The goals are more or less integrated—the degree is a question of empirical fact—and roughly ordered in some hierarchy of value. Involving various degrees of sentiment and significance, the prevailing goals comprise a frame of aspirational reference. They are the things “worth striving for.” They are a basic, though not the exclusive, component of what Linton has called “designs for group living.” And though some, not all, of these

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cultural goals are related to the biological drives of man, they are not determined by them.

A second element of the cultural structure defines, regulates, and controls the acceptable modes of reaching out for these goals. Every social group invariably couples its cultural objectives with regulations, rooted in the mores or institutions, of allowable procedures for moving toward culturally defined objectives. These regulatory norms are not necessarily identical with technical or efficiency norms. Many procedures which from the standpoint of particular individuals would be most efficient in securing desired values—the exercise of force, fraud, power—are ruled out of the institutional area of permitted conduct. At times, the disallowed procedures include some which would be efficient for the group itself—e.g., historic taboos on vivisection, on medical experimentation, on the sociological analysis of “sacred” norms—since the criterion of acceptability is not technical efficiency but value-laden sentiments (supported by most members of the group or by those able to promote these sentiments through the composite use of power and propaganda). In all instances, the choice of expedients for striving toward cultural goals is limited by institutionalized norms.

Sociologists often speak of these controls as being “in the mores” or as operating through social institutions. Such elliptical statements are true enough, but they obscure the fact that culturally standardized practices are not all of a piece. They are subject to a wide gamut of control. They may represent definitely prescribed or preferential or permissive or proscribed patterns of behavior. In assessing the operation of social controls, these variations—roughly indicated by the terms *prescription*, *preference*, *permission*, and *proscription*—must of course be taken into account.

To say, moreover, that cultural goals and institutionalized norms operate jointly to shape prevailing practices is not to say that they bear a constant relation to one another. The cultural emphasis placed upon certain goals varies independently of the degree of emphasis upon institutionalized means. There may develop a very heavy, at times a virtually exclusive, stress upon the value of certain goals, involving comparatively little concern with the institutionally prescribed means of striving toward these goals. The limiting case of this type is reached when the range of alternative procedures is governed only by technical rather than institutional norms. Any and all procedures which promise attainment of the all-important goal would be permitted in this hypothetical polar case. This constitutes one type of malintegrated culture. A second polar type is found in groups where activities originally conceived as instrumental are transmuted into self-contained practices

lacking further objectives. The original purposes are forgotten and close adherence to institutionally prescribed conduct becomes a matter of ritual.<sup>1</sup> Sheer conformity becomes a central value. For a time, social stability is ensured—at the expense of flexibility. Since the range of alternative behaviors permitted by the culture is severely limited, there is little basis for adapting to new conditions. There develops a tradition-bound, “sacred” society marked by neophobia. Between these extreme types are societies which maintain a rough balance between emphases upon cultural goals and institutionalized practices, and these constitute the integrated and relatively stable, though changing, societies.

An effective equilibrium between these two phases of the social structure is maintained so long as satisfactions accrue to individuals conforming to both cultural constraints, viz., satisfactions from the achievement of goals and satisfactions emerging directly from the institutionally canalized modes of striving to attain them. It is reckoned in terms of the product and in terms of the process, in terms of the outcome and in terms of the activities. Thus continuing satisfactions must derive from sheer participation in a competitive order as well as from eclipsing one’s competitors if the order itself is to be sustained. If concern shifts exclusively to the outcome of competition, then those who perennially suffer defeat will, understandably enough, work for a change in the rules of the game. The sacrifices occasionally—not, as Freud assumed, invariably—entailed by conformity to institutional norms must be compensated by socialized rewards. The distribution of statuses through competition must be so organized that positive incentives for adherence to status obligations are provided *for every position* within the distributive order. Otherwise, as will soon become plain, aberrant behavior ensues. It is, indeed, my central hypothesis that aberrant behavior may be regarded sociologically as a symptom of dissociation between culturally prescribed aspirations and socially structured avenues for realizing these aspirations.

Of the types of societies that result from independent variation of cultural goals and institutionalized means, we shall be primarily concerned with the first—a society in which there is an exceptionally strong emphasis upon specific goals without a corresponding emphasis upon institutional procedures. If it is not to be misunderstood, this statement must be elaborated on. No society lacks norms governing conduct. But societies do differ in the degree to which the folkways,

1. This ritualism may be associated with a mythology which rationalizes these practices so that they appear to retain their status as means, but the dominant pressure is toward strict ritualistic conformity, irrespective of the mythology. Ritualism is thus most complete when such rationalizations are not even called forth.

and institutional controls are effectively integrated with the goals that stand high in the hierarchy of cultural values. The culture may be such as to lead individuals to center their emotional convictions on the complex of culturally acclaimed ends, with far less emotional support for prescribed methods of reaching out for these ends. With such differential emphases upon goals and institutional procedures, the latter may be so vitiated by the stress on goals as to have the behavior of many individuals limited only by considerations of technical expediency. In this context, the sole significant question becomes: Which of the available procedures is most efficient in netting the culturally approved value? The technically most effective procedure, whether culturally legitimate or not, becomes typically preferred to institutionally prescribed conduct. As this process of attenuation continues, the society becomes unstable and there develops what Durkheim called “anomie” (or normlessness).

The working of this process eventuating in anomie can be easily glimpsed in a series of familiar and instructive, though perhaps trivial, episodes. Thus, in competitive athletics, when the aim of victory is shorn of its institutional trappings and success becomes construed as “winning the game” rather than “winning under the rules of the game,” a premium is implicitly set upon the use of illegitimate but technically efficient means. The star of the opposing football team is surreptitiously slugged; the wrestler incapacitates an opponent through ingenious but illicit techniques; university alumni covertly subsidize “students” whose talents are confined to the athletic field. The emphasis on the goal has so attenuated the satisfactions deriving from sheer participation in the competitive activity that only a successful outcome provides gratification. Through the same process, tension generated by the desire to win in a poker game is relieved by successfully dealing oneself four aces or, when the cult of success has truly flowered, by sagaciously shuffling the cards in a game of solitaire. The faint twinge of uneasiness in the last instance and the surreptitious nature of public delicts indicate clearly that the institutional rules of the game are *known* to those who evade them. But cultural (or idiosyncratic) exaggeration of the success-goal leads men to withdraw emotional support from the rules.<sup>2</sup>

2. It appears unlikely that cultural norms, once interiorized, are wholly eliminated. Whatever residuum persists will induce personality tensions and conflict, with some measure of ambivalence. A manifest rejection of the once-incorporated institutional norms will be coupled with some latent retention of their emotional correlates. “Guilt feelings,” “a sense of sin,” “pangs of conscience” are diverse terms referring to this unrelieved tension. Symbolic adherence to the nominally repudiated values or rationalizations for the rejection of these values constitute a more subtle expression of these tensions.

This process is not, of course, restricted to the realm of competitive sport, which has simply provided us with microcosmic images of the social macrocosm. The process whereby exaltation of the end generates a literal *demoralization*, i.e., a deinstitutionalization, of the means occurs in many<sup>3</sup> groups where the two components of the social structure are not highly integrated.

Contemporary American culture appears to approximate the polar type in which great emphasis upon certain success-goals occurs without equivalent emphasis upon institutional means. It would of course be fanciful to assert that accumulated wealth stands alone as a symbol of success just as it would be fanciful to deny that Americans assign it a place high in their scale of values. In some large measure, money has been consecrated as a value in itself, over and above its expenditure for articles of consumption or its use for the enhancement of power. Money is peculiarly well adapted to become a symbol of prestige. As Simmel emphasized, money is highly abstract and impersonal. However acquired, fraudulently or institutionally, it can be used to purchase the same goods and services. The anonymity of an urban society, in conjunction with these peculiarities of money, permits wealth, the sources of which may be unknown to the community in which the plutocrat lives or, if known, to become purified in the course of time, to serve as a symbol of high status. Moreover, in the American dream there is no final stopping point. The measure of monetary success is conveniently indefinite and relative. At each income level, as H. F. Clark has found, Americans want just about twenty-five per cent more (but this "just a bit more" continues to operate once it is obtained). In this flux of shifting standards, there is no stable resting point, or rather, it is the point which manages always to be "just ahead." . . . To say that the goal of monetary success is entrenched in American culture is only to say that Americans are bombarded on every side by precepts which affirm the right or, often, the duty of retaining the goal even in the face of repeated frustration. Prestigious representatives of the society reinforce the cultural emphasis. The family, the school, and the workplace—the major agencies shaping the personality structure and goal formation of Americans—join to provide the intensive disciplining required if individuals are to retain intact a goal that remains elusively beyond reach, if they are to be motivated by the promise of a gratification which is not redeemed. Parents serve as a transmission belt for the

3. "Many," not all, unintegrated groups, for the reason mentioned earlier. In groups where the primary emphasis shifts to institutional means, the outcome is normally a type of ritualism rather than anomie.

values and goals of the groups of which they are a part—above all, of their social class or of the class with which they identify themselves. And the schools are of course the official agency for the passing on of prevailing values, with a large proportion of the textbooks used in city schools implying or stating explicitly "that education leads to intelligence and consequently to job and money success."<sup>4</sup> Central to this process of disciplining people to maintain their unfulfilled aspirations are the cultural prototypes of success, the living documents testifying that the American dream can be realized if one has the requisite abilities. [. . .]

The symbolism of a commoner rising to the estate of economic royalty is woven deep in the texture of the American culture pattern, finding what is perhaps its ultimate expression in the words of one who knew whereof he spoke, Andrew Carnegie: "Be a king in your dreams. Say to yourself, 'My place is at the top.'"<sup>5</sup>

Coupled with an emphasis on the obligation to maintain lofty goals is a correlative emphasis on the penalizing of those who draw in their ambitions. Americans are admonished "not to be a quitter" for in the dictionary of American culture, as in the lexicon of youth, "there is no such word as 'fail.'" The cultural manifesto is clear: one must not quit, must not cease striving, must not lessen one's goals, for "not failure, but low aim, is crime."

Thus the culture enjoins the acceptance of three cultural axioms: First, all should strive for the same lofty goals since these are open to all; second, present seeming failure is but a way station to ultimate success; and third, genuine failure consists only in the lessening or withdrawal of ambition.

In rough psychological paraphrase, these axioms represent, first, a symbolic "secondary reinforcement" of incentive; second, curbing the threatened extinction of a response through an associated stimulus; third, increasing the motive-strength to evoke continued responses despite the continued absence of reward.

In sociological paraphrase, these axioms represent, first, the deflection of criticism of the social structure onto one's self among those so situated in the society that they do not have full and equal access to opportunity; second, the preservation of a given structure of social power by having individuals in the lower strata identify themselves, not

4. Malcolm S. MacLean, *Scholars, Workers and Gentlemen* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938), 29.

5. Cf. A. W. Griswold, "The American Cult of Success" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1933).

with their compeers, but with those at the top (whom they will ultimately join); and third, providing pressures for conformity with the cultural dictates of unslackened ambition by the threat of less than full membership in the society for those who fail to conform.

It is in these terms and through these processes that contemporary American culture continues to be characterized by a heavy emphasis on wealth as a basic symbol of success, without a corresponding emphasis upon the legitimate avenues on which to march toward this goal. How do individuals living in this cultural context respond? And how do our observations bear upon the doctrine that deviant behavior typically derives from biological impulses breaking through the restraints imposed by culture? What, in short, are the consequences for the behavior of people variously situated in the social structure of a culture in which the emphasis on dominant success-goals has become increasingly separated from an equivalent emphasis on institutionalized procedures for seeking these goals?

### Types of Individual Adaptation

Turning from these *culture patterns*, we now examine types of adaptation by individuals within the culture-bearing society. Though our focus is still the cultural and social genesis of varying rates and types of deviant behavior, our perspective shifts from the plane of patterns of cultural values to the plane of types of adaptation to these values among those occupying different positions in the social structure.

We here consider five types of adaptation, as these are schematically set out in table 12.1, where (+) signifies "acceptance," (-) signifies "rejection," and ( $\pm$ ) signifies "rejection of prevailing values and substitution of new values."

Examination of how the social structure operates to exert pressure upon individuals for one or another of these alternative modes of behavior must be prefaced by the observation that individuals may shift from one alternative to another as they engage in different spheres of social activities. These categories refer to role behavior in specific types of situations, not to personality. They are types of more or less enduring response, not types of personality organization. To consider these types of adaptation in several spheres of conduct would introduce a complexity unmanageable within the confines of this paper. For this reason, we shall be primarily concerned with economic activity in the broad sense of "the production, exchange, distribution and consumption of goods and services" in our competitive society, where wealth has taken on a highly symbolic cast.

TABLE 12.1 A TYPOLOGY OF MODES OF INDIVIDUAL ADAPTATION

<i>Modes of Adaptation</i>	<i>Culture Goals</i>	<i>Institutionalized Means</i>
I. Conformity	+	+
II. Innovation	+	-
III. Ritualism	-	+
IV. Retreatism	-	-
V. Rebellion*	$\pm$	$\pm$

\*This fifth alternative is on a plane clearly different from that of the others. It represents a transitional response seeking to *institutionalize* new goals and new procedures to be shared by other members of the society. It thus refers to efforts to *change* the existing cultural and social structure rather than to accommodate efforts *within* this structure.

#### I. Conformity

To the extent that a society is stable, adaptation type I—conformity to both cultural goals and institutionalized means—is the most common and widespread. Were this not so, the stability and continuity of the society could not be maintained. The mesh of expectancies constituting every social order is sustained by the modal behavior of its members representing conformity to the established, though secularly changing, culture patterns. It is, in fact, only because behavior is typically oriented toward the basic values of the society that we can speak of a human aggregate as comprising a society. Unless there is a deposit of values shared by interacting individuals, there exist social relations, if the disorderly interactions may be so called, but no society. [ . . . ]

Since our primary interest centers on the sources of *deviant* behavior, and since we have briefly examined the mechanisms making for conformity as the modal response in American society, little more need be said regarding this type of adaptation at this point.

#### II. Innovation

Great cultural emphasis upon the success-goal invites this mode of adaptation through the use of institutionally proscribed but often effective means of attaining at least the simulacrum of success—wealth and power. This response occurs when the individual has assimilated the cultural emphasis upon the goal without equally internalizing the institutional norms governing ways and means for its attainment.

From the standpoint of psychology, great emotional investment in an objective may be expected to produce a readiness to take risks, and

this attitude may be adopted by people in all social strata. From the standpoint of sociology, the question arises, which features of our social structure predispose toward this type of adaptation, thus producing greater frequencies of deviant behavior in one social stratum than in another?

On the top economic levels, the pressure toward innovation not infrequently erases the distinction between businesslike strivings this side of the mores and sharp practices beyond the mores. As Veblen observed, "It is not easy in any given case—indeed it is at times impossible until the courts have spoken—to say whether it is an instance of praiseworthy salesmanship or a penitentiary offense." The history of the great American fortunes is threaded with strains toward institutionally dubious innovation as is attested by many tributes to the Robber Barons. The reluctant admiration often expressed privately, and not seldom publicly, of these "shrewd, smart and successful" men is a product of a cultural structure in which the sacrosanct goal virtually consecrates the means. This is no new phenomenon.

[. . .] Not all large departures from institutional norms in the top economic strata are known, and possibly fewer deviations among the lesser middle classes come to light. Sutherland has repeatedly documented the prevalence of "white-collar criminality" among businessmen. He notes, further, that many of these crimes were not prosecuted because they were not detected or, if detected, because of "the status of the businessman, the trend away from punishment, and the relatively unorganized resentment of the public against white-collar criminals."<sup>6</sup> A study of some 1,700 prevalently middle-class individuals found that "off the record crimes" were common among wholly "respectable" members of society. Ninety-nine percent of those questioned confessed to having committed one or more of forty-nine offenses under the penal law of the State of New York, each of these offenses being sufficiently serious to draw a maximum sentence of not less than one year. The mean number of offenses in adult years—this excludes all offenses committed before the age of sixteen—was eighteen for men and eleven for women. Fully 64 percent of the men and 29 percent of the women acknowledged their guilt on one or more counts of felony which, under the laws of New York, would be ground for depriving them of all rights of citizenship. [. . .] On the basis of these results, the authors modestly

6. Edwin H. Sutherland, "White Collar Criminality," *American Sociological Review* 5 (1940): 1-12; "Crime and Business," *Annals, American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 1941, 217, 112-18; "Is 'White Collar Crime' Crime?" *American Sociological Review* 10 (1945): 132-39.

conclude that "the number of acts legally constituting crimes are far in excess of those officially reported. Unlawful behavior, far from being an abnormal social or psychological manifestation, is in truth a very common phenomenon."<sup>7</sup>

But whatever the differential rates of deviant behavior in the several social strata, and we know from many sources that the official crime statistics uniformly showing higher rates in the lower strata are far from complete or reliable, it appears from our analysis that the greatest pressures toward deviation are exerted upon the lower strata. Cases in point permit us to detect the social mechanisms involved in producing these pressures. Several researches have shown that specialized areas of vice and crime constitute a "normal" response to a situation where the cultural emphasis upon pecuniary success has been absorbed but where there is little access to conventional and legitimate means for becoming successful. The occupational opportunities of people in these areas are largely confined to manual labor and the lesser white-collar jobs. Given the American stigmatization of manual labor, which has been found to hold rather uniformly in all social classes,<sup>8</sup> and the absence of realistic opportunities for advancement beyond this level, the result is a distinct tendency toward deviant behavior. The status of unskilled labor and the consequent low income cannot readily compete, *in terms of established standards of worth*, with the promises of power and high income from organized vice, rackets, and crime.<sup>9</sup>

For our purposes, these situations exhibit two salient features. First, incentives for success are provided by the established values of the culture; and second, the avenues available for moving toward this goal are largely limited by the class structure to those of deviant behavior. It is the *combination* of the cultural emphasis and the social structure that produces intense pressure for deviation. Recourse to legitimate chan-

7. James S. Wallerstein and Clement J. Wyle, "Our Law-Abiding Law-Breakers," *Probation*, April, 1947.

8. National Opinion Research Center, *National Opinion on Occupations*, April, 1947.

9. See Joseph D. Lohman, "The Participant Observer in Community Studies," *American Sociological Review* 2 (1937): 890-98; and William F. Whyte, *Street Corner Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943). Note Whyte's conclusions, pages 273-74; "It is difficult for the Cornerville man to get onto the ladder [of success], even on the bottom rung. . . . He is an Italian, and the Italians are looked upon by upper-class people as among the least desirable of the immigrant peoples. . . . the society holds out attractive rewards in terms of money and material possessions to the 'successful' man. For most Cornerville people these rewards are available only through advancement in the world of rackets and politics."

nels for "getting in the money" is limited by a class structure that is not fully open at each level to men of good capacity.<sup>10</sup> Despite our persisting open-class ideology,<sup>11</sup> advance toward the success-goal is relatively rare and notably difficult for those armed with little formal education and few economic resources. The dominant pressure leads toward the gradual attenuation of legitimate, but by and large ineffectual, strivings and the increasing use of illegitimate, but more or less effective, expedients.

Of those located in the lower reaches of the social structure, the culture makes incompatible demands. On the one hand, they are asked to orient their conduct toward the prospect of large wealth—"Every man a king," said Marden and Carnegie and Long—and on the other, they are largely denied effective opportunities to do so institutionally. The consequence of this structural inconsistency is a comparatively high rate of deviant behavior. The equilibrium between culturally designated ends and means becomes highly unstable with progressive emphasis on attaining the prestige-laden ends by any means whatsoever. Within this context, Al Capone represents the triumph of amoral intelligence over morally prescribed "failure," when the channels of vertical mobility are closed or narrowed *in a society which places a high premium on economic affluence and social ascent for all its members.*<sup>12</sup>

This last qualification is of central importance. It implies that other aspects of the social structure, besides the extreme emphasis on pecuniary success, must be considered if we are to understand the social sources of deviant behavior. A high frequency of deviant behavior is

10. Numerous studies have found that the educational pyramid operates to keep a large proportion of unquestionably able but economically disadvantaged youth from obtaining higher formal education.

11. The shifting historical role of this ideology would be a profitable subject for exploration. The "office-worker-to-president" imagery was once in approximate accord with the facts, in the loose sense that vertical mobility was probably more common then than now. The ideology persists however, possibly because it still performs an important function for motivating members of the society to work within the social framework. It probably operates to increase the probability of Adaptation I and to lessen the probability of Adaptation V. In short, the role of this doctrine has changed from that of a roughly valid theorem to that of an ideology.

12. The role of Blacks in this connection raises almost as many theoretical as practical questions. It has been reported that large segments of the Black population have assimilated the dominant caste's values of pecuniary success and social advancement, but have "realistically adjusted" themselves to the "fact" that social ascent is presently confined almost entirely to movement within the caste. See John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936), 66 ff.; Donald Young, *American Minority Peoples* (New York: Harper, 1932), 581. See also the further discussion in the present chapter.

not generated merely by lack of opportunity or by this exaggerated pecuniary emphasis. A comparatively rigidified class structure, a feudalistic caste order, may limit opportunities far beyond the point which obtains in American society today. It is only when a system of cultural values extols, virtually above all else, certain common success-goals *for the population at large* while the social structure rigorously restricts or completely closes access to approved modes of reaching these goals *for a considerable part of the same population*, that deviant behavior ensues on a large scale. Otherwise said, our egalitarian ideology denies by implication the existence of non-competing individuals and groups in the pursuit of pecuniary success. Instead, the same body of success-symbols is held to apply for all. Goals are held to transcend class lines, not to be bounded by them, yet the actual social organization is such that there exist class differentials in accessibility of the goals. In this setting, a cardinal American virtue, "ambition," promotes a cardinal American vice, "deviant behavior."

This theoretical analysis may help explain the varying correlations between crime and poverty. "Poverty" is not an isolated variable which operates in precisely the same fashion wherever found; it is only one in a complex of identifiably interdependent social and cultural variables. Poverty as such and consequent limitation of opportunity are not enough to produce a conspicuously high rate of criminal behavior. Even the notorious "poverty in the midst of plenty" will not necessarily lead to this result. But when poverty and associated disadvantages in competing for the culture-values approved for *all* members of the society are linked with a cultural emphasis on pecuniary success as a dominant goal, high rates of criminal behavior are the "normal" outcome. Thus, crude (and not necessarily reliable) crime statistics suggest that poverty is less highly correlated with crime in southeastern Europe than in the United States. The economic life-chances of the poor in these European areas would seem to be even less promising than in this country, so that neither poverty nor its association with limited opportunity is sufficient to account for the varying correlations. However, when we consider the full configuration—poverty, limited opportunity, and the assignment of cultural goals—there appears some basis for explaining the higher correlation between poverty and crime in our society than in others where rigidified class structure is coupled with *differential class symbols of success*.

The victims of this contradiction between the cultural emphasis on pecuniary ambition and the social bars to full opportunity are not always aware of the structural sources of their thwarted aspirations. To be sure, they are typically aware of a discrepancy between individual

worth and social rewards. But they do not necessarily see how this comes about. Those who do find its source in the social structure may become alienated from that structure and become ready candidates for Adaptation V (rebellion). But others, and this appears to include the great majority, may attribute their difficulties to more mystical and less sociological sources. For as the distinguished classicist and sociologist-in-spite-of-himself, Gilbert Murray, has remarked in this general connection, "The best seed-ground for superstition is a society in which the fortunes of men seem to bear practically no relation to their merits and efforts. A stable and well-governed society does tend, speaking roughly, to ensure that the Virtuous and Industrious Apprentice shall succeed in life, while the Wicked and Idle Apprentice fails. And in such a society people tend to lay stress on the reasonable or visible chains of causation. But in [a society suffering from anomie] . . . , the ordinary virtues of diligence, honesty, and kindness seem to be of little avail."<sup>13</sup> And in such a society people tend to put stress on mysticism: the workings of Fortune, Chance, Luck.

Actually, both the eminently "successful" and the eminently "unsuccessful" in our society often attribute the outcome to luck. Thus, the prosperous man of business, Julius Rosenwald, declared that 95 percent of the great fortunes were "due to luck."<sup>14</sup> And a leading business journal, in an editorial explaining the social benefits of great individual wealth, finds it necessary to supplement wisdom with luck as the factors accounting for great fortunes: "When one man through wise investments—aided, we'll grant, by good luck in many cases—accumulates a few millions, he doesn't thereby take something from the rest of us."<sup>15</sup> In much the same fashion, the worker often explains economic status in terms of chance. "The worker sees all about him experienced and skilled men with no work to do. If he is in work, he feels lucky. If he is out of work, he is the victim of hard luck. *He can see little relation between worth and consequences.*"<sup>16</sup>

But these references to the workings of chance and luck serve distinctive functions according to whether they are made by those who

13. Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1925), 164–65. Professor Murray's chapter, "The Failure of Nerve," from which I have taken this excerpt, must surely be ranked among the most civilized and perceptive sociological analyses in our time.

14. See the quotation from an interview cited in Gustavus Meyers, *History of the Great American Fortunes* (New York: Modern Library, 1937), 706.

15. *Nation's Business* 27 no. 9 (n.d.): 8–9.

16. E. W. Bakke, *The Unemployed Man* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1934), 14.

have reached or those who have not reached the culturally emphasized goals. For the successful it is, in psychological terms, a disarming expression of modesty. It is far removed from any semblance of conceit to say, in effect, that one was lucky rather than altogether deserving of one's good fortune. In sociological terms, the doctrine of luck as expounded by the successful serves the dual function of explaining the frequent discrepancy between merit and reward while keeping immune from criticism a social structure which allows this discrepancy to become frequent. For if success is primarily a matter of luck, if it is just in the blind nature of things, if it bloweth where it listeth and thou canst not tell whence it cometh or whither it goeth, then surely it is beyond control and will occur in the same measure *whatever the social structure.*

For the unsuccessful, and particularly for those among the unsuccessful who find little reward for their merit and their effort, the doctrine of luck serves the psychological function of enabling them to preserve their self-esteem in the face of failure. It often entails the dysfunction of curbing motivation for sustained endeavor.<sup>17</sup> Sociologically, as implied by Bakke,<sup>18</sup> the doctrine may reflect a failure to comprehend the workings of the social and economic system, and may be dysfunctional inasmuch as it eliminates the rationale of working for structural changes making for greater equities in opportunity and reward.

[. . .] Among those who do not apply the doctrine of luck to the gulf between merit, effort, and reward there may develop an individuated and cynical attitude toward the social structure, best exemplified in the cultural cliché that "it's not what you know, but who you know, that counts."

In societies such as our own, then, the great cultural emphasis on pecuniary success for all and a social structure which unduly limits practical recourse to approved means for many has set up a tension toward innovative practices which depart from institutional norms. But this form of adaptation presupposes that individuals have been imperfectly socialized so that they abandon institutional means while retaining the success-aspiration. Among those who have fully internalized the institutional values, however, a comparable situation is more likely to

17. At its extreme, it invites resignation and routinized activity (Adaptation III) or a fatalistic passivism (Adaptation IV), of which more presently.

18. Bakke, *The Unemployed Man*, 14, where he suggests that "the worker knows less about the processes which cause him to succeed or have no chance to succeed than business or professional people. There are more points, therefore, at which events appear to have their incidence in good or ill luck."

lead to an alternative response in which the goal is abandoned but conformity to the mores persists. This type of response calls for further examination.

### III. Ritualism

The ritualistic type of adaptation can be readily identified. It involves the abandoning or scaling down of the lofty cultural goals of pecuniary success and social mobility to the point where one's aspirations can be satisfied. But though one rejects the cultural obligation to attempt "to get ahead in the world," though one draws in one's horizons, one continues to abide almost compulsively by institutional norms.

It is something of a terminological quibble to ask whether this represents "genuinely deviant behavior." Since the adaptation is, in effect, an internal decision and since the overt behavior is institutionally permissive, though not culturally preferred, it is not generally considered to represent a "social problem." Intimates of individuals making this adaptation may pass judgment in terms of prevailing cultural emphases and may "feel sorry for them," they may, in the individual case, feel that "old Jonesy is certainly in a rut." Whether this is described as deviant behavior or no, it clearly represents a departure from the cultural model in which Americans are obliged to strive actively, through institutionalized procedures, to move onward and upward in the social hierarchy.

We should expect this type of adaptation to be fairly frequent in a society which makes one's social status largely dependent upon one's achievements. For, as has often been observed,<sup>19</sup> this ceaseless competitive struggle produces acute status anxiety. One device for allaying these anxieties is to lower one's level of aspiration—permanently. Fear produces inaction, or more accurately, routinized action.<sup>20</sup>

The syndrome of the social ritualist is both familiar and instructive. His implicit life-philosophy finds expression in a series of cultural clichés: "I'm not sticking my neck out"; "I'm playing safe"; "I'm satisfied with what I've got"; "Don't aim high and you won't be disappointed." The theme threaded through these attitudes is that high ambitions invite frustration and danger whereas lower aspirations produce satisfac-

19. See, for example, Harry Stack Sullivan, "Modern Conceptions of Psychiatry," *Psychiatry* 3 (1940): 111-12; and Robert K. Merton, Marjorie Fiske and Alberta Curtis, *Mass Persuasion* (New York: Harper, 1946), 159-60.

20. Pierre Janet, "The Fear of Action," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 16 (1921): 150-60, and the discussion by F. L. Wells, "Social Maladjustments: Adaptive Regression," in *Handbook of Social Psychology*, ed. Clark Murchison (n.p.: 1935), which bears closely on the type of adaptation examined here.

tion and security. It is a response to a situation that appears threatening and excites distrust. It is the attitude implicit among workers who carefully regulate their output to a constant quota in an industrial organization where they have occasion to fear that they will "be noticed" by managerial personnel and "something will happen" if their output rises and falls.<sup>21</sup> It is the perspective of the frightened employee, the zealously conformist bureaucrat in the teller's cage of the private banking enterprise or in the front office of the public works enterprise.<sup>22</sup> It is, in short, the mode of adaptation of individually seeking a *private* escape from the dangers and frustrations that seem inherent in the competition for major cultural goals by abandoning these goals and clinging all the more closely to the safe routines and the institutional norms.

If we should expect *lower-class* Americans to exhibit Adaptation II—"innovation"—to the frustrations enjoined by the prevailing emphasis on large cultural goals and the fact of small social opportunities, we should expect *lower-middle-class* Americans to be more often represented among those making Adaptation III, "ritualism." For it is in the lower-middle class that parents typically exert continuous pressure upon children to abide by the moral mandates of the society, and where the social climb upward is less likely to meet with success than in the upper-middle class. The strong disciplining for conformity with mores reduces the likelihood of Adaptation II and promotes the likelihood of Adaptation III. The socialization patterns of the lower-middle class thus promote the very character structure most predisposed toward ritualism,<sup>23</sup> and it is in this stratum, accordingly, that the adaptative pattern III should most often occur.

But we should note again, as at the outset of this paper, that we are here examining *modes of adaptation* to contradictions in the cultural and social structure; we are not focusing on character or personality types. Individuals caught up in these contradictions can and do move from one type of adaptation to another. Thus it may be conjectured that some ritualists, conforming meticulously to the institutional rules,

21. Fritz J. Roethlisberger and W. J. Dickson, *Management and the Worker* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939), chap. 18 and 531 ff.; and on the more general theme, the typically perspicacious remarks of Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, 138-39.

22. Robert K. Merton, "Bureaucratic Structure and Personality," *Social Forces* 18 (1940): 560-68; and "Role of the Intellectual in Public Bureaucracy," *Social Forces* 23 (1945): 405-15.

23. See, for example, Allison Davis and John Dollard, *Children of Bondage* (Washington: 1940), chap. 12, "Child Training and Class," which, though it deals with the lower- and lower-middle-class patterns of socialization among Blacks in the far South, appears applicable, with slight modification, to the white population as well.



are so steeped in the regulations that they become bureaucratic virtuosos, that they over-conform precisely because they are subject to guilt engendered by previous nonconformity with the rules (i.e., Adaptation II). The occasional passage from ritualistic adaptation to dramatic kinds of illicit adaptation is well documented in clinical case histories and often set forth in insightful fiction. Defiant outbreaks not infrequently follow upon prolonged periods of overcompliance. But though the psychodynamic mechanisms of this type of adaptation have been fairly well identified and linked with patterns of discipline and socialization in the family, much sociological research is still required to account for their different frequencies in different groups and social strata. Our own discussion has merely set out one analytical framework for sociological research focused on this problem.

#### IV. *Retreatism*

Just as Adaptation I (conformity) remains the most frequent, Adaptation IV (the rejection of cultural goals and institutional means) is probably the least common. People who "adapt" (or maladapt) in this fashion are, strictly speaking, *in* the society but not *of* it. Sociologically, these constitute the true "aliens." Not sharing the common frame of values, they can be included as members of the *society* (in distinction from the *population*) only in a fictional sense.

In this category fall some of the adaptive activities of psychotics, autists, pariahs, outcasts, vagrants, tramps, chronic drunkards and drug addicts. They have relinquished culturally prescribed goals and their behavior does not accord with institutional norms. This is not to say that in some cases the source of their mode of adaptation is not the very social structure which they have in effect repudiated or that their very existence within an area does not constitute a problem for members of the society.

From the standpoint of its sources in the social structure, this mode of adaptation is most likely to occur when *both* the culture goals and the institutional practices have been thoroughly assimilated by the individual and imbued with affect and high value, but accessible institutional avenues do not prove effective. There results a twofold conflict: the interiorized moral obligation for adopting institutional means conflicts with pressures to resort to illicit means (which might attain the goal) and the individual is shut off from means which are both legitimate and effective. The competitive order is maintained but frustrated and handicapped individuals who cannot cope with this order drop out. Defeatism, quietism and resignation are manifested in escape mechanisms which ultimately lead them to "escape" from the require-

ments of the society. It is thus an expedient that arises from continued failure to near the goal by legitimate measures and from an inability to use the illegitimate route because of internalized prohibitions, *this process occurring while the supreme value of the success-goal has not yet been renounced*. The conflict is resolved by abandoning *both* precipitating elements, the goals and the means. The escape is complete, the conflict is eliminated and the individual is asocialized.

In public and ceremonial life, this type of deviant behavior is most heartily condemned by conventional representatives of the society. In contrast to the conformist, who keeps the wheels of society running, this type of deviant is a nonproductive liability; in contrast to the innovator who is at least "smart" and actively striving, he sees no value in the success-goal which the culture prizes so highly; in contrast to the ritualist who conforms at least to the mores, he pays scant attention to institutional practices.

Nor does the society lightly accept these repudiations of its values. To do so would be to put these values into question. Those who have abandoned the quest for success are relentlessly pursued to their haunts by a society insistent upon having its members orient themselves to success-striving. [. . .]

This fourth mode of adaptation, then, is that of the socially disinherited who, if they have none of the rewards held out by society, also have few of the frustrations attendant upon continuing to seek these rewards. It is, moreover, a "privatized" rather than a collective mode of adaptation. Although people exhibiting this deviant behavior gravitate toward centers where they come into contact with other deviants and although they may come to share in the subculture of these deviant groups, their adaptations are largely private and isolated rather than unified under the aegis of a new cultural code. The type of collective adaptation remains to be considered.

#### V. *Rebellion*

This adaptation leads people to envisage and seek to bring into being a new, that is to say, a greatly modified social structure. It presupposes alienation from reigning goals and standards. These come to be regarded as purely arbitrary. And the arbitrary is precisely that which can neither exact allegiance nor possess legitimacy, for it might as well be otherwise. In our society, organized movements for rebellion aim to introduce a social structure in which the cultural standards of success would be sharply modified and provision would be made for a closer correspondence between merit, effort, and reward.

But before examining rebellion as a mode of adaptation, we must

distinguish it from a superficially similar but essentially different type, *ressentiment*. Introduced in a special technical sense by Nietzsche, the concept of *ressentiment* was taken up and developed sociologically by Max Scheler.<sup>24</sup> This complex sentiment has three interlocking elements. First, diffuse feelings of hate, envy, and hostility; second, a sense of being powerless to express these feelings actively against the person or social stratum evoking them; and third, a continual reexperiencing of this impotent hostility.<sup>25</sup> The essential point distinguishing *ressentiment* from rebellion is that the former does not involve a genuine change in values. *Ressentiment* involves a sour-grapes pattern which asserts that desired but unattainable objectives do not actually embody the prized values—after all, the fox in the fable does not say that he abandons all taste for sweet grapes; he says only that these particular grapes are not sweet. Rebellion, in contrast, involves a genuine transvaluation, where the direct or vicarious experience of frustration leads to denunciation of previously prized values—the rebellious fox renounces the prevailing taste for sweet grapes. In *ressentiment*, one condemns what one secretly craves; in rebellion, one condemns the craving itself. But though the two are distinct, organized rebellion may draw upon a vast reservoir of the resentful and discontented as institutional dislocations become acute.

When the institutional system is regarded as the barrier to the satisfaction of legitimized goals, the stage is set for rebellion as an adaptive response. To pass into organized political action, allegiance must not only be withdrawn from the prevailing social structure but must be transferred to new groups possessed of a new myth.<sup>26</sup> The dual function of the myth is to locate the source of large-scale frustrations in the social structure and to portray an alternative structure which would not, presumably, give rise to frustration of the deserving. It is a charter for action. In this context, the functions of the counter-myth of the conservatives—briefly sketched in an earlier section of this chapter—become further clarified: whatever the source of mass frustration, it is not to be found in the basic structure of the society. The conservative myth may thus assert that these frustrations are in the nature of things and

24. Max Scheler, *L'homme du ressentiment* (Paris: n.d.). This essay first appeared in 1912; revised and completed, it was included in Scheler's *Abhandlungen und Aufsätze*, appearing thereafter in his *Vom Umsturz der Werte* (n.p.: 1919).

25. Scheler, *L'homme du ressentiment*, 55–56. No English word fully reproduces the complex of elements implied by the word *ressentiment*; its nearest approximation in German would appear to be *Groll*.

26. George S. Petee, *The Process of Revolution* (New York: Harper, 1937), 8–24; see particularly his account of “monopoly of the imagination.”

would occur in *any* social system: “Periodic mass unemployment and business depressions can't be legislated out of existence; it's just like a person who feels good one day and bad the next.”<sup>27</sup> Or, if not the doctrine of inevitability, then the doctrine of gradual and slight adjustment: “A few changes here and there, and we'll have things running as ship-shape as they can possibly be.” Or, the doctrine which deflects hostility from the social structure onto the individual who is a “failure” since “every man really gets what's coming to him in this country.”

The myths of rebellion and of conservatism both work toward a “monopoly of the imagination” seeking to define the situation in such terms as to move the frustrated toward or away from Adaptation V. It is above all the “renegade” who, though himself “successful,” renounces the prevailing values that becomes the target of hostility among those in rebellion. For he not only puts the values in question, as does the out-group, but he signifies that the unity of the group is broken.<sup>28</sup> Yet, as has often been noted, it is typically a rising class rather than the most depressed strata that organizes the resentful and the rebellious into a revolutionary group.

### The Strain Toward Anomie

The social structure we have examined produces a strain toward anomie and deviant behavior. The pressure of such a social order is upon outdoing one's competitors. So long as the sentiments supporting this competitive system are distributed throughout the entire range of activities and are not confined to the final result of “success,” the choice of means will remain largely within the ambit of institutional control. When, however, the cultural emphasis shifts from the satisfactions deriving from competition itself to exclusive concern with the outcome, the resulting stress makes for the breakdown of the regulatory structure. With this attenuation of institutional controls, there occurs an approximation to the situation erroneously held by the utilitarian philosophers to be typical of society, a situation in which calculations of personal advantage and fear of punishment are the only regulating forces.

This strain toward anomie does not operate evenly throughout the society. The present analysis suggests the strata most vulnerable to the pressures for deviant behavior and sets forth some of the mechanisms

27. Robert S. and Helen M. Lynd, *Middletown in Transition* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1937), 408, for a series of cultural clichés exemplifying the conservative myth.

28. See the acute observations by Georg Simmel, *Soziologie* (Leipzig: 1908), 276–77.

operating to produce those pressures. To simplify the problem, monetary success was taken as the major cultural goal, although there are, of course, alternative goals in the repository of common values. The realms of intellectual and artistic achievement, for example, provide alternative career patterns that seldom entail large pecuniary rewards. To the extent that the cultural structure attaches prestige to these alternatives and the social structure permits access to them, the system is somewhat stabilized. Potential deviants may still conform in terms of auxiliary sets of values.

But the central tendencies toward anomie remain, and it is to these that the analytical scheme here set forth calls particular attention. [. . .]

### Concluding Remarks

It should be apparent that the foregoing discussion is not pitched on a moralistic plane. Whatever the sentiments of the reader concerning the moral desirability of coordinating the goals- and means-phases of the social structure, it is clear that imperfect coordination of the two leads to anomie. Insofar as one of the most general functions of social structure is to provide a basis for predictability and regularity of social behavior, it becomes increasingly limited in effectiveness as these elements of the social structure become dissociated. At the extreme, predictability is minimized and what may be called anomie or cultural chaos supervenes.

This essay on the structural sources of deviant behavior remains a brief prelude. It has not included a detailed treatment of the structural elements which predispose towards one rather than another of the alternative responses open to individuals living in an ill-balanced social structure; it has largely neglected but not denied the relevance of the social-psychological processes determining the specific incidence of these responses; it has only briefly considered the social functions fulfilled by deviant behavior; it has not put the explanatory power of the analytical scheme to full empirical test by determining group variations in deviant and conformist behavior; it has only touched upon rebellious behavior that seeks to refashion the social framework.

It is suggested that these and related problems may be advantageously analyzed by use of this scheme.

## Opportunity Structure (1995)

### Emergence of the Concept of Opportunity Structure in the Columbia Micro-environment of the 1950s

A new phase of the evolving Social Structure and Anomie (SS&A) paradigm first found expression in the form of oral publication—this, in the Columbia “classes at that time” which James Coleman, self-described as “an informal course assistant,” recalls for us in tranquillity. These, he recalls, were “the Merton lectures in Sociology 215–216 [“Analysis of Social Structure”] in 1951–52, and Sociology 213–214 [with the odd-sounding but resonating title of “Social Theory Applied to Social Research”] in 1952–53. It was in the latter course of lectures, he reports, that he and fellow students were introduced to the notions of “reconceptualization” and “respecification” of a lower-level empirical generalization as procedures in sociological theorizing.<sup>1</sup> It was in the prior course, evolving from year to year in the early 1950s, that the concept of socially structured “differential access to legitimate opportunity,” set forth in the original 1938 SS&A, became expressly related to the correlative concept of the “legitimate opportunity structure.”

[. . .] *Opportunity structure* designates the scale and distribution of conditions that provide various probabilities for individuals and groups to achieve specifiable outcomes. From time to time, the opportunity structure expands or contracts, as do segments of that structure. However, as indicated by the correlative concepts of socially structured “differential access to opportunity” in the original paradigm of SS&A and of “structural context” in the paradigm for functional analysis, location in the social structure strongly influences, though it does not wholly determine, the extent of access to the opportunity structure. By concept, then, an expanding or contracting opportunity structure does

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1. James S. Coleman, “Robert K. Merton as Teacher” in *Robert K. Merton: Consensus and Controversy*, ed. Jon Clark et al. (London and New York: Falmer Press, 1990), 28–29, 31.