

Syllabus for Problems of Modern Society: The Theory of Institutional Adjustment

In 1946, the year Foster began teaching at the University of Denver, the Social Science Division there began offering Problems of Modern Society. This three-quarter course employed an integrated approach to the broad field of the Social Sciences based on identification of the fundamental principles in which analysis of human behavior is grounded. Professors from many disciplines taught the course and wrote extensive syllabi for the distinctive topics they covered; Foster participated for two years. The only contribution to that effort unequivocally identifiable as his is the following unit on the theory of institutional adjustment, written for the 1948 spring term.

In Unit I of this course the student was introduced to the problem of the relationship between the concept of social value and the character of social analysis. In that connection it was pointed out that the criterion of judgment in terms of which alternatives are compared is a very real determinant of the particular alternative chosen as the answer to any particular problem. The alternatives themselves may be specified by other factors, but which of them is chosen as the proper course of action is determined by the criterion in terms of which the alternatives are compared.¹ And since solving problems requires choosing rationally among alternatives, it becomes clear that the criterion itself must be rationally determined if problems are to be solved at all. Rational choices in working toward a chosen alternative may be maintained with great care and consistency, but the problem at hand still cannot be solved unless the alternative chosen actually resolves the problematic situation, that is, unless the alternative also is a rational choice. But the selected alternative is a result of the criterion of judgment in terms of which the alternatives are compared. And so it necessarily follows that problems cannot be solved unless the criterion of judgment itself is rationally identified.

The rational identification of the character of social value has been set forth under the caption "instrumental efficiency." The reason for choosing that caption was to distinguish the concept from any notion for which validity might be claimed on nonevidential grounds. And the referential content of the concept was set forth in terms of the fullness and the continuity of the social process. For it hardly requires mentioning that any course of action taken under any criterion of judgment which contravenes the continuity of the social process thereby cancels all human action, including the action taken under that criterion.

The instrumental efficiency concept of social value was further substantiated by tracing out the "instrumental" and the "ceremonial" functions of institutions. In this regard, it was observed that the ceremonial functions of institutions are, at bottom, validated on some assumption of authority, whereas the instrumental functions of institutions are validated on the evidences of contribution to the efficiency and continuity of the social process.

In Units III through VI, various institutions were examined and problems centering about them were explored. In those units the instrumental-ceremonial distinction was applied, and the social problems explored were discovered to be constituted by dislocations of the instrumental functions of the institutions under consideration. In seeking solutions to those problems, it was found that the instrumental-efficiency concept of social value is closely related to problem solving. In fact, it was discovered that efforts to use other criteria of judgment have created some of the very problems for which the student was asked to seek solutions.

In these same units it was made evident also that answers to social problems necessarily take the form of institutional adjustments. In fact, it is on that score that social problems are distinguished from personal problems and from physical-engineering problems.

The next logical step is to inquire into what determines institutional adjustments. That is what the present unit is about. It is an effort to indicate the inclusive and continuing factors in institutional adjustment. That is to say, it is an effort to identify the general principles of that process.

In thinking about the general principles, the student should bear in mind that his examination of institutions and his working out of social problems should provide evidences of the inclusive and continuing factors. He should remember also that for principles to be inclusive and continuing they must be inclusive of all that he knows about the institutional processes and modifications. Otherwise, either the claim to generality and foundation is erroneous, or the student's observations of the facts are faulty. And any such discrepancy may be rectified by rechecking the facts or by modi-

fying the principles to bring them into congruence with the established facts.

Principles of Institutional Adjustment

The Character of Scientific Social Principles

Students frequently experience considerable difficulty in applying the scientific method to social analysis. Much less difficulty in that regard is encountered in physical inquiry; although, even there, occasional misunderstanding occurs. This difference between the two areas of inquiry is not occasioned by any necessity of a different kind of thinking which may be required in either area. Rather, the difference is between the kinds of phenomena being studied. In the case of social inquiry, the behavior of human beings is the focus of attention; and human beings display attributes which greatly complicate scientific analysis. But the difference is one of complexity and therefore difficulty, not of a peculiar kind of mental operation required to comprehend social phenomena. If the student is to do well in either area, he must use all of the rational capacity and energy with which he is equipped.

Scientific principles, in whatever area, are statements of continuing factors uniformly applicable to all items in the area of inquiry. In social science, the area of inquiry is the social process, and so any principle for which generality and foundation might be claimed must be applicable to all aspects of that process.

But the social science area of inquiry is a process; it does not present a static picture of any particular pattern of structural parts. Instead, no fact of human history is more obtrusive than that institutions change structurally. The only continuing factors involved are the functions carried on through institutions—the institutions themselves vary from culture to culture and over time in any particular culture. And so the general principles of the social process must be drawn in terms of the functions comprising that process.

It is at this point that difficulty most frequently arises. Most discussions of social phenomena come to focus on institutional structure, as, indeed, they should. For it is through structural institutions that the social process is carried on. But all too frequently the structures themselves, rather than the continuing functions, are used as the criteria of judgment in terms of which those very same structures are judged. The difficulty at this point should, by now, be fairly apparent. If the structure of institutions is to be

judged in terms of the structure of institutions, then quite clearly no rational judgments comparing alternative structures can be made. And if no rational judgment can be made in choosing among alternative institutional structures, then certainly no social problems can be solved. For the solving of institutional problems necessarily involves choosing among alternatives in the form of institutional structures.

The principles, then, if they are to be applicable to social problems, must disclose what kind of data are pertinent to the problems at hand, and they must disclose how those data are related to one another so that the data can be arranged for analysis. And since the answers to social problems necessarily take the form of institutional adjustment, the pertinent principles must disclose the determinants of that kind of adjustment.

The Principle of Technological Determination

The principle of technological determination is simply that social problems can be solved only by adjusting the institutional structures involved in the problem so as to bring them into instrumentally efficient correlation with the technological aspects of the problems. What is meant by "instrumentally efficient correlation" is that the instrumental functions of the institutions in question be carried on at a level of efficiency tolerable to the members of the institution in view of the possibilities indicated by those same technological factors. The members of the community cannot "unknow" anything which they do know as a technological or physical fact; and no amount of coercion, short of complete destruction, can alter that situation. The members of an institution cannot avoid seeking adjustments because they cannot avoid the human incidences of a problematic situation which requires adjustments. And since they cannot "unknow" their accomplishments in the technological area, they are driven toward institutional modifications so long as the problem and they remain.

Furthermore, the technological aspects of human know-how are characteristically more dynamic in the developmental sense than are the institutional aspects. The inclusive reason for this is that the ceremonial functions of institutions directly stimulate active support of an institutional structure, even though its instrumental functions are recognizably below what could be accomplished within the existing technological know-how. And so it is that most frequently the comparatively developmental character of technology results in social problems.

Not only is technology determinate of institutional problems in the sense that it creates such problems, but also it is determinate of the solu-

tions in the sense that it constitutes the basic data which must be taken as given in social problems.

*The Principle of
Recognized Interdependence*

The principle of recognized interdependence is simply that the immediate pattern of any institutional adjustment is specified by the pattern of interdependencies recognized by the members of the institution. Institutional structures are made up of habitual behavior in most part, but an adjustment in any such structure requires that a deliberate choice be made among the possible alternatives recognized by those who must alter their behavior. A new pattern of behavior requires that the behavior be "directed" in its initiation. It becomes habitual through repetition, but its initial performance requires conscious direction. Since all adjustments, and therefore the whole of institutional structure, are specified at initiation, it necessarily follows that conceptual apprehension precedes the course of action differentiating the new pattern from the old.

In case the power to prescribe behavior is divorced from the members of the institution, the principle still holds. And the lack of acquiescence on the part of the persons whose relationships are being modified does no violence to the principle. In either or both cases, the fact still remains that the new pattern of behavior must be specified in conceptual form before it can emerge into the new pattern of behavior. However unwillingly the persons involved accept the new pattern and however little discretion they may have in specifying the adjustment, they must recognize their actual relationships as specified in the new pattern. Otherwise, the pattern simply does not eventuate into action. No one can perform a new activity without deliberately directing his efforts in the novel activity.

Patterns of human relationship that we call institutions are "made up of" habitual actions and attitudes, but they are not *determined* by habit. Their determination is a matter of deliberate and guided action. The habituation follows; it does not precede. Constitution is not the same as determination. And it is the determination of institutional structures with which social science must be concerned in order to understand its constitution.

The Principle of Minimal Dislocation

All institutional modifications must be capable of being incorporated into the remainder of the institutional structure. It is convenient to call

this the principle of minimal dislocation. It discloses the limits of adjustment in terms of rate and in terms of degree and area.

Utopias may be fun to contemplate, but they do not and cannot exist because there can be no end of social problems. And there can be no end of social problems because there is no way completely to stop man from inventing and creating. Even if there were such an expedient, the actual changes in geographic meteorological conditions would force institutional adjustments.

Since changes occur in the given data, the answers must change accordingly. But the modifications cannot stand alone; they must be incorporated into the institutional structure of which they are parts. And this circumstance sets certain limitations on the rapidity and extent of institutional adjustments. In the first place, the adjustments must be in tolerable rapport with the noninstitutional factors. Attempted adjustments must make instrumentally better use of the technological factors, else they simply increase the human incidences that initially motivated the adjustments. In this sense, there is compulsion toward progress. In the second place, attempted or contemplated adjustments must be brought as problematic factors into the comprehension of the persons involved; and those projections must do no violence to the factors not considered problematic. Otherwise, it would be impossible to initiate the new pattern because of its disruption of the social process. Failure of the community or the sovereign group to comprehend the related adjustments necessary to making an adjustment recognized as necessary may indefinitely postpone resolution until the necessarily related adjustments are brought into view.

And that is why deliberate investigation in the scientific sense is required if social problems are to be solved as rapidly as they accumulate by virtue of deliberate scientific inquiry into man's social problems.

Conclusion

The principle of technological determination discloses what data are required, both institutional and noninstitutional, to grasp any particular social problem. The data encompassed in this principle constitute the requirements for recognizing the difference between "what is" and "what ought to be" in terms of institutional structure as judged by its performance of its instrumental functions. It discloses what information must be at hand to determine what adjustments should be made.

The principle of recognized interdependence discloses the immediate character of institutional innovations which are attempted. It therefore identifies what must be done to get from "what is" to "what ought to be."

In application, it specifies the pattern of understandings which must be accomplished in order to solve any particular social problem. The actual content of its specifications in reference to any particular social problem is disclosed by the data used in "filling in" the first principle.

The principle of minimal dislocation discloses what limitations, in terms of rate and extent, are in effect.

Filling in the data specified by the first principle when applied to a specific problem discloses "what is" and "what should be"—it sets up the problem so that the student may anticipate what will be the course of adjustment as well as what should be the course of adjustment. The application of the second principle to the same data as understood by the persons involved discloses what should be done as well as the probability of its eventuation. The application of the third principle sets forth what can be done. Together with their pattern of interrelationships, they constitute the theory of institutional adjustment.

Note

1. At first blush, this might seem to require the assumption that people always act rationally. But such is not the case. All that is assumed is that people are *capable* of rational behavior.