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ROLE—EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

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I

Georg Simmel asked in the title to a famous essay ‘How is society possible?’¹ The conventional answer for his sociological successors, especially those who have neglected to read him, has been found in the concept of role. Indeed, one of the more surprising features of the intellectual history of contemporary sociology is the degree to which this elusive concept has been taken for granted by its users as a kind of theoretical haven where they could rest on their intellectual laurels while struggling with the more tractable problems of the discipline. By using role to define ‘How sociology is possible’ many of the fundamental dilemmas raised by abstraction in sociology, and in particular those indissolubly linked abstractions, individual and society, can be set on one side.

In most introductory texts the student will be introduced to role as one of the basic concepts of the discipline. He will learn that social roles or positions are filled by individuals who perform in them more or less adequately. The normative constraints of society are thus tangibly represented in a system of roles for performance in which the individual is socialized, which subsequently define his rights, privileges and social relationships. Such students, particularly if these textbooks have been written within the American tradition, will then be led to consider the substantive areas of socialization, normative control and deviant behaviour and institutional role complexes such as family, occupation or religion. They are less likely to return, at least in their first year’s work, to the broader philosophical issues concealed within the apparently innocent Pandora’s box labelled ‘role’.

The European tradition has rested more on the fundamental problems of the nature of society, ‘the theory of society’ rather than ‘sociological theory’, and has in recent years been most clearly developed within Germany and especially in the definition of ‘critical sociology’ developed by Habermas and others.² As Dahrendorf suggests in introducing a recent collection of essays, ‘A theory of society, then, not only prepares the way for the formulation of sociological theories, but accompanies such theories as a guard against their reification and a reminder of their implications, both theoretical and practical.’³

¹ G. Simmel, ‘How is society possible?’, *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 16, 3, 1910/11, pp. 372-91.

² J. Habermas, *Theorie und Praxis: Sozialphilosophische Studien* (Neuwied-Berlin, 1963).

³ R. Dahrendorf, *Essays in the Theory of Society* (London, 1968), p. vii.

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Precisely because of the need for sociologists to demonstrate the initial reality of 'society' the concept of role has been readily and uncritically reified in this sense. It has been absorbed as a primary sociological abstraction, essential to understanding the social bond and the social fabric, conveniently articulating society as external normative constraints in Durkheim's sense, with the individual as an immanent actor in a socially prescribed part. This primary sociological abstraction tends then, too often, to be swallowed whole without there being much attempt to explore fully its conceptual strengths and weaknesses, its explanatory value or its possibilities of empirical verification. 'Role theory' has tended to be concerned more with one side or the other of the abstraction; it has emphasized personality in relation to social psychology or functional normative constraints in relation to deviance and conformity. Even a recent text by Michael Banton with the title *Roles* and attempting to use the concept as a major explanatory device enjoins its readers to the necessity for a truce: 'It is necessary to assume in the examination of particular roles that there is agreement among all the parties affected as to the definition of the role in question.'¹ As Heinrich Popitz points out in the paper included in this volume, the concept of social role is 'progenitive of, and almost simultaneously fatal to, sociological detachment'.²

The most significant debate surrounding the concept in recent years developed in Germany in response to the publication of Ralf Dahrendorf's 'Homo Sociologicus: or the history, significance, and limits of the category of social role' in 1958. In reality this has been a debate about the nature of sociology itself and has been instructive for the extent to which it focussed attention on the assumptions on which the concept was based. Dahrendorf in a Postscript to 'Homo Sociologicus', 'Sociology and Human Nature', published in 1962, reiterates this point characteristically: 'To put the matter paradoxically, at the risk of being misunderstood: even if sociology asks questions about man, it is in substance concerned not with man but with ways of reducing man's actions to rational terms.'³

Without misunderstanding Dahrendorf's assumptions here, it is, of course, precisely the kinds of rationality to which those actions have been reduced, that have created the arid, dehumanized and rigid characteristics of *homo sociologicus* especially in some of his earlier and more deterministic variants. The notion of role, however used, depends then on certain assumptions regarding the nature of man, his plasticity as a learner, his capacity in reflecting the expectations of others, his criteria of rationality, and his perception of situations in terms of his interests. In using the notion of role as a sociological abstraction of the conditions of human behaviour we should necessarily define these limits with some precision if *homo sociologicus*, 'role player', is to be an abstraction of man rather than mask.

1 M. Banton, *Roles: an Introduction to the Study of Social Relations* (London, 1965), p. 36.

2 See below, H. Popitz, 'The concept of social role as an element of sociological theory', p. 11.

3 R. Dahrendorf, 'Sociology and human nature', *Theory of Society*, pp. 94-5.

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The variety of usages to which the concept of role is put further demonstrates its uncertain status within general sociological theory. Essentially it rests on the analogy with the theatre, a dimension to be discussed more fully below; it is a part, a character played out in accordance with the expectations of an audience. Indeed it is a part corresponding to a defined social position the incumbent of which is expected to behave in predictable ways. It is precisely on the basis of such predictions regarding the (normal) behaviour of fathers to sons, masters to servants, husbands to wives, that the possibility of enduring social relationships rests. The problem, of course, with the dramaturgical analogy lies in the fact that the lines for the part appear to have been lost. If society is the playwright then how is the actor to learn his part perfectly and to what extent is it assumed that he can and must *ad lib*?

Some recognition of the dilemma is usually found in the paired sets of definitions used to distinguish the dual components of role. Linton for instance uses status to define an ideal pattern of conduct, and role to define actual behaviour; Parsons distinguishes status with reference to obligations, and role as denoting rights;¹ Nadel distinguishes between ‘status’ and ‘person’.² Banton in his definition of role suggests that while we may define it as ‘a set of norms and expectations applied to the incumbent of a particular position’ we must continue to recognize two distinct approaches to it. ‘A psychological approach is likely to concentrate upon how these ideas are held by individuals. The structural approach traces the way the sharing of norms and expectations creates networks of rights and obligations’.³ Rather more precise formulations of the definitions of role are to be found in the work of Merton, Gross and others who have moved beyond the level of simple and arbitrary definition to the more solid problems of ‘role-complexes’, ‘role-sets’, ‘role-clusters’, ‘role-consistency’ and ‘role-conflict’ and have paid attention to the relationship of subjective role definition to reference group theory.

It is indeed progress to have moved away from the too simple and arbitrary definitions of role. ‘The concept of role is at present still rather vague, nebulous and non-definitive.’⁴ A full definition today demands analytical precision in relation to the component strands which have contributed to the development of ‘role-theory’, often without reference to one another. Our definition of social role, then, must

1 T. Parsons, *The Social System* (Glencoe, Ill., 1951). In a more recent essay Parsons defines role in the following terms: ‘But since the typical individual participates in more than one collectivity, the relevant structural unit is not the “total” individual or personality, but the individual as a role. In its normative aspect, then, a role may be thought of as the system of normative expectations for the performance of a participating individual in his capacity as a member of a collectivity. The role is the primary point of direct articulation between the personality of the individual and the structure of the social system.’ *Sociological Theory and Modern Society* (New York, 1967).

2 S. F. Nadel, *The Theory of Social Structure* (London, 1957).

3 M. Banton, *Roles*, p. 29.

4 L. J. Neimann and J. W. Hughes, ‘The problem of the concept of role – a re-survey of the literature’, *Social Forces*, 30 (1951), p. 149.

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endeavour to bridge these divergent component traditions as well as recognizing the fundamental tension between subjective and objective elements, between individual and society represented in the human paradox.

One strand in the tradition of role theory derives from Cooley's notion of the 'looking-glass self',¹ Mead's 'taking the role of the other', via Piaget's theory of the stages of development and infant socialization² to the more refined social psychology of Theodore Newcomb³ and Biddle and Thomas.⁴ It has been developed as a component of the discussion of the relationship between nature and nurture, the socialization process and the characteristic attributes of personality formation. The emphasis on socialization within this tradition has perhaps tended to place stress on 'preparation for adult roles' and to give rise to assumptions about the relatively fixed social positions for adequate performance in which the whole socialization experience is a necessary preparation. Ineffective adult role-performance, deviance, differential aspiration, etc. could then, in part at least, be attributed to failures or dissonances in the maturation process by which ideally stages of physical development were linked to the appropriate levels of socialization and transition.

A second tradition has emphasized the structural components of societies and has tended to consider the structural or functional requirements of societies as the defining set of constraints (obligations and rights) which govern individuals occupying different positions in society. The set of assumptions underlying this tradition has been based, at least originally, on simple societies, or at least those in which social positions appeared relatively fixed and constant. Role was then used to describe the extent to which individual behaviour actually corresponded to the ideal, and the paired concepts of status and role were thus used in an attempt to distinguish the ideal and the actual elements of behaviour in relation to a functional (and essentially static) model of society. Two concepts have not fared much better than one in the sense that the distinction has been neither always precise nor consistent enough to make any substantial analytic contribution to the discussion. The term status has, in any case, increasingly been limited to its proper reference to positions within a social stratification system and has only a limited utility in relation to the general theory of role.⁵ Broadly, though one may suggest that this

1 C. H. Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order* (New York, 1902).

2 J. Piaget, *The Language and Thought of the Child* (New York, 1955), and G. H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society* (Chicago, 1934). See also A. Strauss (ed.), *The Social Psychology of George Herbert Mead* (Chicago, 1956).

3 T. Newcomb, *Social Psychology* (New York, 1950).

4 B. J. Biddle and E. H. Thomas (eds.), *Role Theory: Concepts and Research* (New York, 1966).

5 The conceptual tangles surrounding the use of the term status have been well summarized by Alvin Gouldner who, after an extensive list of definitions, concludes: 'That these varying definitions are not necessarily contradictory is small consolation and certainly no guarantee that they all refer to the same things. Nowhere do these definitions become more opaque than when – as they frequently do – they refer to a status as a "position" in something. The ready familiarity of the word "position" seems to induce paralysis of the analytic nerve.' Alvin V. Gouldner, 'Cosmopolitans and locals: toward an analysis of latent social roles – I', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 2 (December 1957), 284.

tradition has tended to emphasize a model of society in which the functional division of labour has developed to produce a category of roles on which universal conclusions can be based, one must doubt that the dependence on status as the referent for role and role performance is necessarily productive. There is a status for wife but is there a status, in the same sense, for woman? In other words the level of specificity tends to characterize the real utility of the status–role relationship.

In any case it is precisely in these areas of relatively unstructured social interactions – the garden so richly cultivated by Simmel,¹ Goffman² and Aubert³ among others – that the relationship of role to fixed position or status breaks down. The management of identity in ‘confined’, ‘open’ or ‘abnormal’ situations calls for an analysis of social action and interaction less contained than the characteristically institutionalized ‘theatre’ which role-theory habitually provides for. Popitz points out in his paper the ‘characteristic’ quality of such roles and, following Weber’s analysis of legitimation of authority structures, shows how leadership roles emerge from recognition and response, e.g. institutionalization on the part of an audience. ‘The decisive fact is whether a position can develop whose rights and duties can be exercised not just by one individual in his uniqueness. Only with the de-individualization of norms are role-norms formed.’⁴

III

The difficulties and weaknesses of general role theory are discussed fully in the papers which follow and for many of the reasons already hinted at in this brief introductory discussion doubts are raised about the concept and its usage as a general proposition in sociology. While in more than one paper it is suggested that we should abandon the concept altogether, it is precisely because of the ambiguities which attach to it that it is seen as unsatisfactory. In other words most sociologists would readily admit that once one can be precise about the limited area in which one is specifying role characteristics the concept has a demonstrable utility and an analytical precision. It is merely that we must not let the fact that role analysis is a profitable and necessary activity for the sociologist lead us to a too-ready assumption that we have solved the general propositions contained in the concept of role itself. As Gouldner remarked in an important article almost fifteen years ago, ‘The very currency of role concepts may invite complacency concerning their theoretical clarity.’⁵

1 K. Woolf (ed.), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (New York, 1950).

2 E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London, 1969); *Stigma: notes on the management of spoiled identity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1964); *Encounters* (Indianapolis, 1961); *Strategic Interaction* (Oxford, 1970).

3 V. Aubert, *The Hidden Society* (Totowa, N.J., 1965).

4 See below, H. Popitz, ‘The concept of role as an element of sociological theory’, p. 17.

5 A. Gouldner, ‘Cosmopolitans and locals: toward an analysis of latent social roles’, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 2 (December 1957), 281.

The tendencies toward simplistic determinist analysis of social position and role-occupant has been greatly modified by the emphasis within specific studies of the complexity of role-audiences — the different sets of parties concerned with both the normative constraints and the actual performance. These audiences have been described by Merton as ‘role-sets’¹ corresponding to a given occupation — in his case the school teacher. Gross and his colleagues make a similar and far-reaching analysis in relation to the ‘role’ of school superintendents² and the extent of consensus among these ‘audiences’ of the role in question. Differential perception, role-taking and reference group theory thus introduce an analysis of the context of social action and the capacity for role modification in relation to this context. Basic to the theory of social action as developed by Parsons, such analysis illuminates and defines operationally significant aspects of role which can be usefully developed. Turner, for instance, takes the concept of role-taking as a fundamental aspect of social interaction where it is understood as ‘a process of looking at or anticipating another’s behavior by viewing it in the context of a role imputed to that other’.³ The heartland of symbolic interactionist theory is reached in the ‘double-bind’ of actor responding emphatically to actor in determining his own subsequent action. As Devereux summarizes Parson’s theory: ‘The minimum frame of reference for talking about action must therefore include, beside the actor and the situation, some explicit reference to subjective processes or orientation, conceived as causally relevant interviewing mechanisms and not as epiphenomena, and to explicitly formulated notions of ends or goals and of normative standards, conceived as ideal elements which function to structure the actor’s orientation to situations.’⁴

In her paper in this book Margaret Coulson makes some just and swingeing criticisms of neologistic exercises in sociology. The difficulty is a real one and not one that we can entirely ignore — the concept is as good as it is precise but the attempt at precision leads to ‘ever more complicated qualifications and sub-qualifications while the relationship of the theory to the policeman’s actual behaviour, for example, becomes ever more remote and unconvincing’.⁵ We return to the dilemma with which we started; the nature of the rationality of sociological concepts about human behaviour, whether derived from dramatic analogy, deductive rationality or mechanistic or organic models, remains a construct, a mask which hopefully will reveal rather than entirely conceal the man beneath.

¹ R. K. Merton, ‘The role set’, *British Journal of Sociology* (June 1957), 108.

² N. Gross, W. Mason and A. McEachern, *Exploration in Role Analysis: Studies of the school superintendency role* (London, 1966).

³ Ralph H. Turner, ‘Role-taking, role standpoint, and reference group behavior’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 61 (January 1956), 316.

⁴ E. C. Devereux, Jr, ‘Parsons’ sociological theory’, in M. Black (ed.), *The Social Theories of Talcott Parsons* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1961), p. 21.

⁵ See below, M. Coulson, ‘Role: a redundant concept in sociology? Some Educational Considerations’, p. 114.

IV

Emerging from the growing and substantial sociological debate on role theory in Germany, Popitz' important paper *Der Begriff der Sozialen Rolle als Element der Soziologischen Theorie* has unfortunately only been available hitherto in a German edition.¹ It represents a substantial analysis of the whole history of role theory and the essential difficulties which have arisen from Linton's early distinctions and which continue in contemporary sociological theory.² Though Dahrendorf's 'Homo Sociologicus' essay is now well known outside Germany, Popitz' critique of the necessity for such a stark abstraction is not. In translation it still provides, some five years after its original German publication, a valuable definitive statement about the discussion of role which does much to make the task of the present editor easier in introducing an inevitably diverse set of papers with a variety of approaches to the topic.

The discussion which follows has the form of a dialogue between three of my former colleagues at the University of East Anglia. A number of us from different disciplines had occasion to work together on the frontiers of our various subjects and it seemed opportune that the concept of role, which was certainly part of the professional as well as the commonsense vocabulary of literary criticism, philosophy and sociology, should form the subject of such an exchange. Naturally enough it focusses on the criteria of rational abstraction in deference to Hollis's interest as a philosopher and on the dramaturgical analogy in deference to Bradbury's interest in the theatre. That Heading, as sociologist, is encouraged to face some of the implications and theoretical assumptions surrounding the concept is fruitful. Clearly such a discussion cannot resolve all the problems but it does demonstrate that the somewhat neurotic concerns of sociologists with their intellectual equipment can benefit from debate among a wider circle of colleagues.

Gordon's paper on role development in relation to the stages of the life cycle extends the work of Ralph Turner's comprehensive model and stresses the changing character of roles.³ Far from being static the basic roles linked to the stages of development are emerging and receding; they are not whole suits of clothes picked out of the prop box to be taken on entire. Starting with an ideal-typical life-cycle model for contemporary, urban, middle-class America, Gordon extends this discussion, stressing the aspects of internalization and institutionalization of the role already noted in relation to the paper by Popitz. The question of identity and

1 H. Popitz, *Der Begriff der Sozialen Rolle als Element der Soziologischen Theorie* (J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen, 1967).

2 R. H. Linton, *The Study of Man* (New York, 1936), and also a later work in which there is some change in emphasis in his concept of role in relation to status but still some confusion as to the dimensions involved in the dual concept of role in relation to status. In *The Cultural Background of Personality* (New York, 1945), he writes: 'The term role will be used to designate the sum total of the culture patterns associated with a particular status.'

3 See R. H. Turner, 'Role-taking, role standpoint and reference group behaviour', in B. J. Biddle and E. J. Thomas (eds.), *Role Theory*, pp. 151-9.

personal autonomy discussed in connection with retirement and the giving-up of significant roles gives fresh insight into the general question of whether there is a 'person underneath when all the social roles are removed'.

Margaret Coulson questions the continued utility of the concept of role and suggests that it should be abandoned in favour of a more specific and dynamic conceptual framework. She exemplifies this in relation to the situation of the school and makes reference to a number of recent attempts to introduce a conflict model into analysis of the educational setting. It is surprising how frequently education is selected as the arena *par excellence* in discussions of role and role-theory. Merton,¹ Gross,² and Elder³ are only a few of those who have found this a most fruitful field for research and illustration. As a milieu it is, of course, a natural continuation of the life-cycle analysis developed further here in Chad Gordon's paper. Certainly education is an area rich in its fusion of the socialization and maturation process. In addition the parental surrogate roles of teachers demonstrate a conflict in role performance which is further aggravated by uncertainties of professional status.⁴ A recent example in Northern Ireland which came to my attention reinforces one such point of role conflict. In a boys' school where the large majority of teachers are male and where it is customary for the boys to refer to them as 'Sir' this mode of address is used by the boys to the women teachers as well. Though one doubts if this is widespread, similar examples, such as the use of husbands' rank and number for wives of servicemen being treated in military hospitals, underline the point, and incidentally suggest that the present movement for 'women's liberation' has a lot of ground to cover.

John Urry's paper provides a critical analysis of the reference group in relation to role theory, its origins in the symbolic interactionist sociological tradition and the failure, in his view, of attempts at applying the concept of comparative reference group. This concept, most signally illustrated by Stouffer's study of the American soldier⁵ in 1949, rests on certain assumptions about the process of self-evaluation in relation to others. His paper is primarily concerned with a full critique of this area with particular attention to W. G. Runciman's *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice*.⁶ Urry raises both theoretical and methodological difficulties which, he claims, lie in the psychological model on which the theory of social comparison rests as well as the equilibrium theory of society implicit in the relative deprivation hypothesis.

¹ R. K. Merton, 'The role set'.

² N. Gross, W. Mason and A. McEachern, *Explorations in Role Analysis*.

³ G. Elder, Jr, 'Age integration and socialization in an educational setting', *Harvard Educational Review*, 37, 4 (1967), 594-619.

⁴ T. Leggatt, 'Teaching as a profession', in J. A. Jackson (ed.), *Professions and Professionalization* (Cambridge, 1970).

⁵ S. A. Stouffer *et al.*, *The American Soldier* (New York, 1949).

⁶ W. G. Runciman, *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice: a Study of Attitudes to Social Inequality in twentieth century England* (London, 1966).

Runciman in the concluding short paper has provided a reply to Urry's criticisms and has developed the discussion further in relation to some of the critical points which Urry raises. The discussion will not rest here; nor should it. As in other branches of role analysis considered earlier there is still much room for debate. In his concluding remarks Runciman reminds us that 'the only justification of theoretical or methodological discussion of this kind is its pay-off in empirical research'.¹ So far there has been all too little to test the validity of the still very generalized concepts surrounding the notion of social role.

¹ See below, W. G. Runciman, 'Reply to Mr Urry', p. 147.

2

THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL ROLE AS AN ELEMENT OF SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

HEINRICH POPITZ

I

Even in sociology the concept of role shows evidence of its origins. Here too it leads a rather dramatic existence.

Role, role-player, role-behaviour; with these words is often connected the first general theoretical abstraction in sociology that is really intelligible to the sociology student. They are obviously particularly suited both to demonstrating social phenomena and, at the same time, to inculcating a way of seeing things at a distance, of rendering remote what is all too close in everyday social experience and of making what is self-evident in social contexts strange. Though the role-concept performs this service without much difficulty it quickly loses its function again: all too speedily it fits into colloquial usage, leads to limitless associations and allows itself to be arbitrarily brought into play. With little effort all social experiences can be 'en-rolled'. Thus, the process soon turns full circle: the concept of social role is today progenitive of, and almost simultaneously fatal to, sociological detachment.

The obvious suggestion that another, less easily-misused, word be selected is no longer practicable. Sociology has taken its concepts, to a relatively large extent, from colloquial speech. It was only as a secondary consideration that comparison on an international scale was begun. Mainly those – mostly Latin – words have prevailed which exist with almost the same sound in the major languages: norm, sanction, institution, organization, group, social control, class, status, mobility – and, of course, role. There is practically no choice left now but to delimit and equate further the often very different areas of meaning in the particular languages.

As with all such abstractions one may delve as far back in the history of sociology as one likes if it is desired to show that something similar has always hitherto been 'meant'.¹ It is, however, more instructive to see in the works of Georg Simmel what expenditure of general theoretical reflection was necessary – how far

¹ Thus in his polemic against Plato, Aristotle points out the variety and relativity of 'role-norms' in order to emphasize their independence, as against their dissolution by Plato in the general concept of virtue. The virtue of the good citizen is not simply the virtue of a good man; it corresponds at any given time to his particular position and task in the polis, and changes as the constitutions change. Even for slaves there is a specific virtue, just as for husband and wife, adult and child. See the interpretation in Lothar Philipps, *Zur Ontologie der sozialen Rolle* (Frankfurt am Main, 1963), pp. 37ff.