

The Folk Society

by

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Understanding of society in general and of our own modern urbanized society in particular can be gained through consideration of societies least like our own: the primitive, or folk, societies. All societies are alike in some respects, and each differs from others in other respects: the further assumption made here is that folk societies have certain features in common which enable us to think of them as a type—a type which contrasts with the society of the modern city...

A primitive or folk society is that of small groups scattered over a territory. The folk society is a small society. There are no more people in it than can come to know each other well. And they remain in long association with each other. Among the Western Shoshone the individual parental family was the group which went about, apart from other families, collecting food; a group of families would assemble and so remain for a few weeks, from time to time, to hunt together; during the winter months such a group of families would form a single camp. Such a temporary village included perhaps one hundred people...

The folk society is also an isolated society. Probably there is no real society whose members are in complete ignorance of the existence of people other than themselves, but folk societies are made up of people who have little, if any, communication with outsiders....This isolation is one half of a whole of which the other half is intimate communication among the members of the society.

Through books the civilized people communicate with the minds of other people and with other times, and one aspect of the isolation of the folk society is the absence of books. The folk communicate only by word of mouth; therefore the communication upon which understanding is built is only that which takes place among neighbors, within the little society itself. The folk society has no access to the ideas and experience of the past such as books provide. Therefore the oral tradition of a folk society has no check or competitor. Knowledge of what has gone on in the past reaches no further back than the memory of the old people in a folk society—behind “the time of our grandfathers” all is legendary and vague. With no form of belief established by books, there can be no historical sense, such as civilized people have. The only accumulation of experience is the increase of wisdom which comes as the individual lives longer; therefore the old, knowing more than the young can know until they too have lived that long, have prestige and authority.

The people who make up a folk society are very much alike. Having lived in long intimacy with one another, and with no others, they have come to form single a biological type. The physical homogeneity of local, inbred populations has often been noted by anthropologists. Moreover, since the people communicate with one another and with no others, one man’s learned ways of doing and thinking are the same as another’s. Another

way of putting this is to say that in a folk society what one man knows and believes is the same as what all men know and believe. Therefore, a student of a folk society can describe it fairly well by learning what goes on in the minds of only a few of its members. The similarity among the members is also found when one generation is compared with its successor. Old people find young people doing, as they grow up, what the old people did at the same age, and what they have come to think right and proper. There is no “generation gap” in a folk society. In other words, there is little change in such a society.

The members of a folk society have a strong sense of belonging together. Folk sense their own resemblances and feel correspondingly united. Communication ultimately with each other, each has a strong claim on the sympathies of others. Moreover, when aware of societies other than their own, they emphasize their own mutual likeness and value themselves higher than others. They say of themselves “we” as against all others, who are “they.”

Thus we may characterize the folk society as small, isolated, nonliterate, and homogeneous, with a strong sense of group solidarity. We can also say that the technology of such a society is relatively simple: there are few tools to make tools; there is not making of artifacts by machine manufacture; there is little or no use of natural power.

There is not much division of labor in the folk society: what one person does is what another does. In the ideal folk society all the tools and ways of production are shared by everybody. The “everybody” must mean “every adult man” or “every adult woman”—for the obvious exception to the homogeneity of the folk society lies in the differences between what men do and know and what women do and know. But this division of labor between the sexes is typically the only division. In the Andaman Islands, for example, every man is expected to be able to hunt pig, to harpoon turtle, and to catch fish, and also to cut a canoe, to make bows and arrows and all other objects that are made by men. So all men share the same interests and have, in general, the same experience in life.

The foregoing characterizations amount, roughly, to saying that the folk society is a little world off by itself, a world in which the recurrent problems of life are met by all its members in much the same way. But this statement fails to emphasize what is perhaps the most important characteristic of a folk society. The ways in which the members of the folk society meet the recurrent problems of life are conventionalized ways; they are the results of long intercommunication within the group in the face of these problems; and these conventionalized ways are interrelated so that they make up a coherent and consistent system. Such a system is what we mean when we say that the folk society has a “culture.”

A culture is an organization of conventional understandings which are passed on from one generation to the next. It is, as well, the typical facts and objects which express

and maintain these understandings. In the folk society, as in all human societies, this cultural system provides for all the recurrent needs of the individual from birth to death.

This is not the same as saying, as was said early in this essay, that in the folk society what one man does is the same as what another man does. What one man does in a mob is the same as what another man does, but a mob is not a folk society. It is—so far as culture is concerned—its very opposite. The members of a mob each do the same thing, it is true, but it is a very immediate and particular thing, and it is done without much reference to tradition. It does not depend upon and express a great many conventional understandings which are related to one another. In other words, a mob has no culture. A folk society exhibits culture to the greatest conceivable degree. A mob is merely a group of people doing the same simple thing simultaneously. A folk society is an organization of people doing many different things successively as well as simultaneously. The members of a mob act with reference to the same object of attention. The members of a folk society are guided in acting by previously established, conventional understandings; at any one time they do many different things, which are complexly related to one another to express collective feelings and ideas....

The Papago Indians constituted a folk society in southern Arizona. Among these Indians a war party was not so simple a thing as a number of men going out to kill the enemy. It was a complex activity involving everybody in the society, and dramatizing the religious ideas fundamental to Papago life. Preparation for the war party involved many practical or ritual acts on the part of the immediate participants, their wives and children, and many others. While the war party was away, the various relatives of the warriors had many things to do—prayer, fasting, etc. These were specialized activities, each appropriate to just one kind of person. So the war was waged by everybody. These activities, different and special as they were, interlocked with each other to make a large whole, the society-during-a-war-expedition. And all these specialized activities obeyed fundamental principals which were understood by all and which were expressed in the very forms of the acts—the gestures of the rituals, the words of songs, the explanations of the elders to the younger people. All Papago Indians understood that the end in view was the acquisition by the group of the supernatural power of the slain enemy. Is supernatural power, potentially of great, positive value, was dangerous—and the purpose of the different activities and rituals is to guarantee the success of the war party, and then to guarantee a successful draining-off the supernatural power acquired by the slaying into a safe and “usable” form.

We may say, then, that in the folk society conventional behavior is strongly patterned: that is, it tends to conform to a type or a norm. These patterns are interrelated in thought and in action with one another, so that each is consistent with the others. Every customary act among the Papago the successful warriors return is consistent with a general conception of supernatural power...

We have noted that the specialized activities incident to the Papago war party obeyed fundamental principles understood by all. These “principles” had to do with the ends of living, as conceived by the Papago. A near-ultimate good for the Papago was the

acquisition of supernatural power. This end was not questioned. In general, the goals of a folk society are not questioned; they are simply taken as given...

What is done in the ideal folk society is done not because somebody decides at once that it should be done, but because it seems “necessarily” to flow from the nature of things. There is, moreover, no desire to reflect on traditional acts and consider them critically. In short, behavior in a folk society is traditional and uncritical. The Indians may decide when to go on a hunt—but it is not a matter of debate whether or not one should, from time to time, hunt.

Primitive people do not question custom. The member of a folk society does not stand off from his customary conduct and objectively analyze what one is doing. The meaning of his behavior, as defined by his culture, is not questioned by a man from a folk society...

It has been said that the folk society is small and that its members have lived in long and intimate association with one another. It has also been said that in such societies there is little critical or abstract thinking. These characteristics are related to yet another characteristic of the folk society: behavior is personal, not impersonal. A “person” may be defined as that social object which I feel to respond to situations as I do, with all the feelings and interests which I feel to be my own. A “person” is myself in another form; his qualities and values are inherent within him, and his significance for me is not merely one of utility. A “thing,” on the other hand, is merely a social object which has no claim upon my sympathies; a thing responds to me, as I conceive it, mechanically; its value for me exists in so far as it serves my end. In the folk society all human beings admitted to the society are treated as “persons”—one does not deal impersonally (“thing-fashion”) with any human being in the small world of the folk society.

Moreover, in the folk society much besides human beings is treated personally. The pattern of behavior which is first suggested by the inner experience of the individual (that is, by his wishes, fears, sensitivity, and interests of all sorts) is projected into all objects with which he comes into contact. Thus nature, too, is treated personally: the elements, the features of the landscape, the animals, and especially anything in the environment which by its appearance suggests that it has the characteristics of mankind—to all these are attributed qualities of the human person.

In short, the personal and intimate life of the child in the family is extended into the social world of the adult and even into inanimate objects. It is not merely that relations in such a society are personal; it is also that they are familial. The first contacts made as the infant becomes a person are with other persons; moreover, each of these first persons, he comes to learn, has a particular kind of relation to him which is associated with that one’s genealogical position. The individual finds himself fixed within a grouping of familial relationships. The kinship connections provide a pattern in terms of which all personal relations are categorized. All relations are personal. But relations are not, with regard to specific behavior, the same for everyone. As a mother is different from a father, and a grandson from a nephew, so are these classes of personal relationship

extended outward into all relationships whatever. In this sense, the folk society is a familial society.

In general, the folk society may be thought of as composed of families rather than of individuals. It is the familial groups that act and are acted upon. There is strong solidarity within the kinship group, and the individual is responsible to all his kin as they are responsible to him. The clan is a natural mutual aid society. A member belongs to the clan, he is not his own; if he is wrong, they will right him; if he does wrong, the responsibility is shared by them...

It has been said in the foregoing paragraphs that behavior in the folk society is traditional uncritical, and that what one man does is much the same as what another man does, and that the patterns of behavior are clear and remain constant throughout the generations. It is also important to stress that, to a member of a folk society, a sense of rightness is inherited in his traditional ways of action. In folk societies "the rules of the game" are typically mores—in other words, notions of moral worth are associated with traditional ways of acting. The value of every traditional act or object or institution is, thus, something which the members of the society are not inclined to call into question—and should the value be called into question, doing so is resented. This characteristic of the folk society may be briefly referred to by saying that it is a sacred society. In the folk society one may not challenge as valueless what has come to be traditional in that society, for what is traditional is sacred.

The sacredness of all social objects is apparent in all folk societies. Thus a social object is surrounded by restraints and protections that keep it away from the commonplace and matter-of-fact. In the sacred there is holiness and dangerousness. When the Papago Indian returned from a successful expedition, bringing the scalp of a slain Apache, the head-hairs of the enemy were treated as loaded with tremendous "charge" of supernatural power; only old men, already successful warriors and purified through religious ritual, could touch the object and make it safe for taking into the home of the slayer. Made into the doll-like form of an Apache Indian, it was, after such ceremonial preparation, at last held for an instant by the members of the slayer's family, addressed with respect and awe, and placed in the house, in order to give off protective power.

In the folk society this inclination to regard social objects and acts as sacred extends into food production activities and even into the foodstuffs of the people. Often the foodstuffs are personified as well as sacred. As a Navajo Indian has explained:

If you are walking along a trail and see a kernel of corn, pick it up. It is like a child lost and starving. According to the legends, corn is just the same as a human being, only it is holier... When a man goes into a cornfield he feels that he is in a holy place, that he is walking among Holy People... Agriculture is a holy occupation. Even before you plant you sing songs. You continue this during the whole time your crops are growing. You cannot help but feel that you are in a holy place when you go through your fields and they are doing well.

In a folk society nothing is solely a means to an immediate practical end. All activities are ends in themselves, activities expressive of the ultimate values of the society. In a folk society there is little or no systematic and scientific ranking. The customary solutions to problems of practical action only perfectly take the form of really effective and understood control of means appropriate to accomplish the desired end; instead, these solutions express the states of mind of the individuals who want the end brought about and fear that it may not be. In other words, a folk society characterized by much magic—by action which is expressive of how the doer feels and thinks, but which, in itself, fails to bring about the desired end. Magic is based on specific experience of emotional states in which the truth revealed not by reason but by the play of emotions upon the human organism. Magic is founded on the belief that hope cannot fail nor desire deceive. In the folk society effective technical action is much mixed with magical activity that is done is a picture of what is desired.

The nature of the folk society could, indeed, be restated in the form of a description of the folk mind. Here it should be noted that the man of the folk society tends to make mental associations which are personal and emotional, rather than abstractly categorical or defined in terms of cause and effect. We have also stressed folk man's tendency to treat nature personally; his "animistic" or "anthropomorphic" quality of primitive thinking contrasts with the means-end pattern of thought which is more characteristic of modern urban man.

In a folk society there is an absence of the economic behavior characteristic of the market in modern capitalist societies. Within the folk society members are bound by religious and kinship ties, and there is no place for the motive of commercial gain. There is no money and nothing is measured by any such common denominator of value. The distribution of goods tends to be an expect of conventional and personal relationships of status: goods are exchanged as expressions of good will and, in large part, as incidents of ceremonial and ritual activities. On the whole, then, the desire to work, to save, and to consume is based—not on a rational appreciation of the material benefits to be received—but on the desire for social recognition through such behavior.

The above description of a typical folk society takes on meaning if the folk society is seen in contrast to the modern city. The vast, complicated, and rapidly changing world in which the urbanite lives today is enormously different from the small, inward-facing folk society, with its well-integrated and little changing moral and religious beliefs. At one time all men lived in these little societies. For many thousands of years men must have lived in folk societies; if the long history of man on earth is considered, urban life began only very recently. And the extreme development secularized.... (???)