

## A Systems Approach to the Study of Complex Society

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Early anthropological research was conducted among simple, non-literate, self-sufficient, hunting or quasi-agricultural communities which were habitually treated as cultural isolates—where contact with the outside-the-village world was generally regarded as inconsequential or at best accidental. Therefore, the society in question was invariably characterized as a functionally integrated and inter-related whole, a closed system with built-in homeostatic mechanisms which would remain, barring further contact, in a state of “dynamic equilibrium.”

As research interests shifted to the more complex peasant societies, a shift which demands new perspectives, the anthropologist, nevertheless, brought with him the theoretical models accumulated from tribal ventures. Robert Redfield (3) clearly established the peasant upon a folk-urban continuum; and although the peasant still retained the closeness of face to face primary relationships, a deep rooted and emotional attachment for the soil, and the warmth of *Gemeinschaft* mythology, there was the unavoidable added discomfort of a relationship to the greater outside world. Yet in spite of its extra-village contacts, the peasant community was generally treated as a geographically and culturally isolated entity whose behavioral dynamics could best be understood by intensive, internally-centered research activities.

Today's complex rural and urban communities, in both the western and non-western world, can no longer be treated as cultural isolates within a closed system. Any study of changing community life must account for that community's relationship to the greater and invariably more complex outside world. Therefore, communities are open systems which cannot be described or analyzed in terms of static boundaries. The focus of outside contact and intervention cannot be ignored, for it is often the very nature of the relationship to the external world that accounts for many of the political, economic, social and ideological changes taking place within the village community.

I am not disclaiming the importance of village studies, nor am I suggesting that the village is not, to some degree, a functionally integrated unit. However, it is time to take another look at the world's communities and to shift our emphasis from the internal aspects of the integrated village to a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the community and its dynamic linkage to the rest of the society.

Because a village-centered study must now include extra-village structural ties, I would like to present one approach to the study of community suggested by Professor Ishino, Donoghue, Marquis and Alchin (1) and Marquis (2) of the Institute for Community Development at Michigan State University.

### The Systems Approach

The systems approach provides both a method and a model for focusing upon a community and its connections to the greater society, because it views the community in terms of its interactions with outside institutions.

Following the model of the ecologists, the systems approach includes not only the people but also the man-made and natural components within the community; it focuses upon the interaction of the human components with the man-made and natural elements.

A community "system" also includes kinship, economic, educational, political, religious and associational institutions which are linked not only to each other but to their counterparts in the greater society.

Interaction between systems takes place through flows or movements of material, energy, people, and information. These flows are continually entering and leaving the system.

### The Systems Approach and the Study of Billsburg

In 1965 my wife and I completed a survey study of a semi-rural midwestern community with a population base of 2500 people. If the direction of our study had been internally centered and oriented in a restrictive and definitive temporal and spatial framework, instead of an open system, the linkages or channels which connect Billsburg to the greater outside world and the flows of material, energy, people, and information along these channels could have gone unnoticed, been ignored, minimized, "explained away" or more likely merely noted. It is because Billsburg was specifically viewed as a system constantly interacting with other systems at the local, state, national and even international level, that the direction and nature of political, social and ideological change became meaningful and integral parts of the study.  
(4)

#### Flow Analysis as a Key Towards Understanding the Interaction Process Between Systems

A flow is any movement of material, energy, people and information along any designated channel or pathway, either between different systems or within a single system.

For example, when we first arrived in Billsburg, we spent the better part of the first day standing at the major highway intersection and observed the traffic patterns. Traffic in Billsburg is basically unidirectional; at 7:00 a.m. the concentration is westward toward Matson (a local urban industrial center), at 5:00 p.m. eastward back to Billsburg. The majority of the cars are newer models in the lower price field. Thus it was not surprising to later learn that approximately seventy percent of working Billsburgians are employed in the greater Matson area, that many of them are skilled and semi-skilled workers with average income of \$7,000, and that Billsburg has overwhelming strong economic ties to the Matson area.

As we began to interview, we discovered that leisure time activities are usually spent at movies, drive-ins, restaurants, bars, and bowling alleys, many of which are located outside the Billsburg area, and at the cultural, social, and athletic functions of Matson's State University.

We also observed that Billsburg's all-purpose general store regularly subscribes to local, county, state and national newspapers including the infamous New York tabloids.

While many major flows are inter-system oriented, internal (within the system) flows are also of considerable importance. My wife reported that women tended to do their daytime shopping at the larger shopping centers located outside the Billsburg city limits and near the outskirts of the greater Matson area, and that the downtown business area was poorly populated, causing the older Billsburg merchants some serious problems. We later found, as one might suspect, that many business enterprises are considering relocation closer to the Matson area. (4)

Thus flows of material, people, and information are helping to establish continuing relationships between Billsburg and the greater Matson area, and, as previously mentioned, through news media, with the rest of the nation. Flow analysis should never be the end product of the research effort. It should be used as a methodological tool which is capable of providing much information, especially when research time-allocation is limited. When flow analysis is coupled with other research activities, it can provide immediate and valuable insights toward understanding the dynamic characteristics of any community.

### The Expanding Nature of Contemporary Society

Many problems arise within the community because the community itself is in a transitional (changing) stage. Many of the internal community systems have expanded to the point where they are no longer subject to internal controls. This often results in organization and influence at higher administrative levels, and consequent conflict situations arise which cannot be explained in terms of the village alone.

If the Methodist Church Council in Detroit decided to send a Negro minister to Billsburg, (since Billsburg is still associated with the church hierarchy in Detroit, such a move is possible) the one hundred percent white Billsburg congregation would, to say the least, certainly be affected by such a decision.

When we started our research Billsburg was undergoing the process of political upheaval. Recent studies indicate that the population base was changing due to a new influx of professionals, semi-professionals, university people, and Matson businessmen. These newcomers are of a more intellectual and liberal orientation than the older and more conservative Billsburgians. Elections for city, township, school, agricultural and public safety offices are no longer controlled by the old city administration, for these "newcomers" are actively participating in community affairs and are changing the nature of Billsburg's political and economic

institutions. Furthermore, these newcomers have maintained an active interest in state and national politics and are involved in political-social programs at the national and even international levels. Thus, decisions made in Washington, Saigon, Moscow, and London, are indirectly able to effect the local political ideologies and practices in Billsburg. (4)

### A Suggested Framework for Viewing the Changing Rural Community

Scientific American (September, 1965), in discussing the alarming rate of urban growth in America, directs our attention to the creation of the Megalopolis: a concentration of linked urban centers that now stretches from Boston to Washington, D. C. If "megolopoly" is a potential sign of America's future, let us not ignore the growth of the "smaller community." These transitional centers are entering into dynamic relationships with their local urban centers; and by this process, if I may introduce still another exotic terms, they are creating a "surbopolis": a concentration of linked communities about an already developed urban complex.

### Conclusion

The anthropologist in his pre-occupation with a "holistic approach" has been primarily concerned with the social-institutional aspects of the community, village, or cultural system, and has neglected other possible research perspectives. If village studies are to expand these "limits of naivete," a more sophisticated approach along spatial dimensions is needed. While many anthropologists are clearly aware of the linkages and flows across and within systems and of their significance, too few studies have focused upon these aspects as integral parts of their investigations. Today's communities no longer exist as "isolates"; the channels to other villages and cities have become the pathways to development, and the flows that pass along these channels are a key to deciphering the directions and processes of change, and a critical factor in understanding the complexities of twentieth century community life.

### Literature Cited

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