THE ROLE OF STATUS SYMBOLS IN SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

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A "social role" may be defined as the regularities in a person's adjustments to or interaction with others, in so far as these regularities may be seen as a response to commonly understood rights and obligations. These rights and obligations are fixed through time by means of legal sanctions and sanctions of the kind that are internalized. Most important of all, these rights and obligations are fixed by being built into a conception of the "self".

From one point of view, a "social system" may be defined as a cluster of roles, in so far as these roles are clearly defined, all-embracing, differentiated and integrated in a single whole. For this it is essential that each member act towards others as if he defined himself and others in the same way that others defined themselves and him. For this, in turn, it is essential that adequate communication occur concerning these definitions.

The rights and obligations of a role or a self are often ill-adapted to the requirements of communication.
This is especially true in a society such as ours where the source of one's status as well as the jurisdiction of most of one's rights are focused in a relatively secluded work-situation. Hence, there frequently develops specialized means of advertising or signifying one's position. Such means may be called "status symbols".\(^1\) This definition implies

\(^1\) This use for the term "symbol" is close to the popular sociological one, and is retained for that reason. In some respects it cuts across the practice in semiotic where signs are classified in terms of the relation of the vehicle to the referent, and not in terms of social function. See, C.S. Peirce, *The Philosophy of Peirce*, selected writings edited by J. Buehrer, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co. 1946), pp. 104-115.

Further, a symbol is not a symbol unless people regularly use it as such. Hence, the symbolic aspect of a vehicle must not be confused with the quality it may have of being a "test" or an "expression", both of which qualities are not dependent upon people chancing to put the vehicle to use. A "test" is something which could be used as a reliable cue to a person's status, but which need not be related in any "essential" way to that for which it is a cue. For instance, linguists can identify the regional backgrounds of persons by noting subtle differences in pronunciation of which laymen and unaware, and which are not related to the important cultural differences between the regions. In "expression", as it were, is a direct trace of some general and/or essential characteristic of a status or the way of life associated with it. For instance, the "dual" aside from being a symbol of Aristocratic status was also a very nice expression of a whole conception of the proper role for a man.

Finally, it is necessary to distinguish status symbols from "collective symbols", although both may appear together in the same vehicle. A status symbol identifies a group in order that an individual may be treated as a member of it. A collective symbol identifies a group in order that all its members may reaffirm their membership.
that the chief social function of status symbols is to signal to others the role a person has and, hence, the behavior to be expected from him.

Status symbols possess certain additional or less general social functions. They serve to address to one another those who have the same roles, in this way sharpening the partisan solidarity on either side of a status line.\(^1\)

Another special function of status symbols is associated with the tendency for them to become richly elaborated and diversified. This retards both the rise of those who are new in power and the fall of those who have lost it. In this way, the continuity of the culture is maintained and the ranks of an old group protected from a sudden onslaught and a disorderly retreat.\(^2\)

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\(^2\) This may be seen, for instance, in the historic role of the Public School System in England, in so far as the symbolic value of possessing "character" and "ways of a gentleman" was gradually transferred from the Aristocracy to the Bourgeoisie.
The several functions of status symbols contribute to organization in a social system. Conversely, when a status fails to be represented by a symbol, or is misrepresented by a symbol, disorganization occurs. The framework in this paper is principally concerned with the latter source of disorganization, that is, misrepresentation.

Status symbols are better suited to the purpose of communication than are the rights and duties which they signify. To this fact status symbols owe their existence. However, this requires that they be something other than, or different from, that which they signify. And this fact ensures the constant possibility that symbols may come to be employed in a fraudulent way, to signify a status which the signifier does not in fact possess.

Hence, the continuing use of status symbols in a society requires that mechanisms develop for restricting the possibility of misrepresentation. The study of status symbols, then, may be approached by classifying the restrictive mechanisms embodied in them. From the start however, it should be added that each one of these restrictive mechanisms seems to be regularly circumvented in one way or another. Therefore, by implication, the schema
used for sorting out restrictive mechanisms may also be used to sort out and classify examples of disorganization to which misrepresentation may give rise.

The classification of six general restrictive mechanisms which follows is, of course, analytical; since any status symbol typically embodies more than one such mechanisms.

1. MORAL RESTRICTIONS: Just as systems of economic rights are made effective by the willingness of people to acknowledge the legitimacy of these rights, so the misuse of certain symbols is prevented by the inward moral constraints which inhibits some people from misrepresenting themselves. This inward compunction is phrased in quite different, but functionally equivalent, ways. For instance, certain middle-class groups in our society refrain from party-drinking and flirtation on grounds of religious principle. Some wealthy upper-middle class groups and certain highly educated groups refrain from behaving in positively valued ways on the grounds, respectively, of propriety and disdain. Among disadvantaged ethnic and racial groups, emulation of the dominant culture is frequently felt to be a form of betrayal. Among aging
women, there is a particular way of phrasing the
seemliness of progressively abstaining from standard
symbolic elaborations of secondary sexual characteristics.

Of course, these inward constraints, howsoever
phrased, are reinforced by the pressure of opinion which
comes both from one's own groups and from the group whose
symbols one may misemploy. However, the literature has too
frequently overlooked the sense in which the efficacy of
these external pressures derives from the readiness with
which inward pressures can be made to reinforce the
outward ones.
LEGAL RESTRICTIONS: Misrepresentation is frequently controlled by the same system of law and enforcement which guarantees the rights to which the symbols themselves purport to refer. The obvious example of this is so-called sumptrary legislation,\(^{(1)}\) such as the rule in the Age of English Chivalry that a Scottish Deerhound could be owned by no one of lesser rank than an Earl.\(^{(2)}\) In Babylonia, "The slave mark (a brand mark burned into the flesh) denoted its bearer as being the private property of and possessed by a master; its removal(usually by incision) was tantamount to theft and punishable with death in the Hammurabi Code.\(^{(3)}\) In our society, professional titles and certificates of training and office enjoy legal protection from those who could use such symbols in absence of the qualifications which they are taken to signify.


\(^3\)Isaac Mendelssohn, Legal Aspects of Slavery in Babylonia, Assyria and Palestine, (Williamsport; The Bayard Press, 1932), p.33.
PHYSICAL RESTRICTIONS: A solution everywhere found to the problem of misrepresentation derives from the use of the kind of symbol which requires appreciable exercise of the very rights which are to be symbolized. Perhaps the best known descriptions of this technique are to be found in the early ethnological reports on the Kwakiutl "potlatch" and in Veblen's discussion of the concept of "conspicuous consumption". Obviously, objects such as furs, jewelry and large homes (in our society) automatically guarantee that those who display them possess wealth which at minimum is equal to the market value of these symbols. Hence, symbols of this kind have frequently been used as "indices" of social status.

Symbols cannot command a high price unless they are limited in some way with respect to number. Frequently, this limitation is based upon certain technological conditions of the way in which the symbol is produced. For instance, certain precious metals require a large work effort, both in discovery and in processing. In the case of "fine" pottery, there is a limit to the productive capacity of any specific pottery workshop, and a much narrower limit to the number of pieces which can be thrown from a particular clay
mold of a particular wax model. Similarly, there are obvious technological reasons why a screen cast can appear in many theaters simultaneously, while the cast of a stage production can only be observed from within the restrictive confines of a single auditorium.

Under certain circumstances, the productive capacity of a single individual may be used as a source of scarcities. This is true in the case of artists and some craftsmen, whose total life output takes the shape of a relatively few distinctive objects. Of course, the productive capacity of any individual is limited. However, the life-product of the ordinary person, unlike that of the artist, comes to be similar to, and so blended with, the efforts of others as to render it indistinguishable therefrom.
4: LEARNING RESTRICTIONS: One test of belonging to a group is the ability to behave during occasions of informal interaction in a way such that other members are impressed with the suitability and likableness of one's general manner. In the minds of the members, such a person is thought of as "one of our kind". In our society words such as "poise", "awkwardness", "breeding", "good mixer" are used in common discourse to express judgements concerning the manner of others.  

Impressions of this kind seem to be built upon a combination of many particles of behavior. These relate to matters of etiquette, deportment, gestures, intonation, vocabulary, small bodily movements and automatic evaluations concerning a host of discrete and admittedly unimportant things.

Status symbols deriving from this source of behavior embody three types of restrictive mechanisms. These shall be treated together for that is the way

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1 For example, see, James West, Plainville, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), pp. 124-126. The difference in manner between classes seemed in the past to have been so marked and dramatic that early novelists such as Aphra Behn favored the theme of the nobleman, lost to gentle company because of wicked design, and found again because of his manner.
they usually appear. The first can be traced to the fact that individuals tend to be impressed by the total effect of these behaviors without being able, as it were, to put a finger on what it was in particular that impressed them. Hence, no one quite knows how to break a style of behavior into parts sufficiently small and defined to make systematic imitation possible.

Another restrictive mechanism resides in the ability to exclude classes of individuals from the social intercourse wherein the secret significance of an act is taught. The third mechanism may be traced to the fact that the manner of a person tends to express in a miniature and concentrated form both the style of life of his group and the relative position of it in society. Hence, the behavior style of a group, that is, the manner of its members, is psychologically difficult for those whose life experience took place in some other group.

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1 The classic example of this the "pass-word". In our society, for instance, the act of buttering or eating a piece of bread before breaking it, is a symbol to the dominant strata of membership in the lower strata. In the latter groups, it is not commonly known that this act is "significant".
5: RANDOM ACTION: RESTRICTIONS: In many societies, avocational pursuits have been used as symbols of status. These involve the cultivation of certain arts, tastes, sports and handicrafts. Status or esteem is accorded experts in these matters and expertness is based upon, and requires, concerted orientation over a long and continuing period of time. For instance, in our society many people "know what clothes and furniture they would like to buy" but, given their price range, are not willing to devote the time required to find what they want.

Of course, as Veblen argued, anything which proves that time has been spent on non-remunerative tasks is a form of conspicuous consumption. However, time-cost is not the only mechanism of restriction which stands in the way of cultivation. Cultivation also involves, as it were, an effect opposite to random action; an effect which excludes from the line of a person's attention all the distractions and deflections which come to plague any intention carried over an extended period of time. This is especially true when the cycle of training and reward is a long one.
An interesting example of the restrictive mechanism implicit in the tendency to random action is to be found in the sometimes valued quality of "restraint". The appreciation of this quality requires that the insistent stimuli of daily life be set aside or held in check so that attention may tarry upon a distinction which would otherwise be overlooked. This is very nicely seen in the so-called Tea Ceremonies of the Zen period of Buddhism in Japan.(1)

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6: INTERACTIONAL RESTRICTIONS: Generally, prestige has a contagious character, passing from the original incumbent to those with whom the incumbent is "personally" related. The diffusion of honor in this way is practicable, neither draining the source nor flooding the society. And this is so because there is a natural, in some sense extra-social, limit to the number of individuals with whom any one person can be intimately related. So-called "personal relations" imply interaction and integration over a wide band of behaviors. On mathematical grounds alone, this is much more likely to occur in groups of two or three members than in groups with a larger number of members.

Similarly, it is customary (and practicable from the sociological point of view) to ascribe a modicum of esteem to all those who can rightfully claim an historic association with someone or something which has latterly achieved a high state of social grace. Here, the number limitation to personal intimacy is reinforced by what might be called "historical closure".
The characteristic way of life which tends to develop among those who share the same rights and obligations is made up, presumably, of many different kinds of values and behaviors. From this total list some items are usually selected out and used for the special purpose of signifying status. From the limited perspective of this paper, we may say that these items are selected because they happen to fulfill the requirements for effective communication and because they embody restrictive mechanisms which restrict the misuse of them. Six of these restrictive mechanisms were outlined, relating, respectively, to matters of morals, law, scarcity, learning, random action and interaction.

As previously said, it is basic to the requirements of social organization that the rights, roles, and self which a person ascribes to himself are the same as those which others ascribe to him. Agreement concerning these crucial facts makes for security at the level of feeling and justified expectation at the level of action. The most general function of status symbols is to communicate these facts. The most general "disfunction" of status symbols
arises from the constant possibility of using symbols to signify non-existent status, thus inducing disagreement or disensus concerning roles and selves. Other functions and disfunctions of symbols, such as those relating to intra-group solidarity and inter-group discrimination, are merely particular examples of the general requirement of communication.

There is no single mechanism of restriction which can withstand too many contingencies, nor is there one which is not regularly and systematically circumvented in some way. This may partly explain why stable groups tend to express their status by means of symbols which rely on many different types of restrictive mechanism. In such cases it appears as if the strength of one mechanism acts as a check upon the weakness of another, preventing, as it were, the members of the group from putting all their symbols in one basket. Conversely, problems for social organization to which symbols give rise can be classified in accordance with the type of mechanisms upon which a particular group may be overdependent or too little dependent. Of course, in each of these situations, the problem faced by the signifying group must be distinguished from the problem faced by the group to whom signification is made.
In conclusion, we should like to outline four problem areas in which the relation of status symbols to social organization is crucial.

1. DECLINING GROUPS: Everywhere one finds that sources of status which were once unchallenged become exhausted or find themselves in competition with new and different sources. Therefore, it is quite common for whole groups to have symbols and expectations which their current economic and political position can no longer support. In such cases, social decline seems to possess an accelerative character; the group is forced to rely more and more upon symbols which involve a small or a past cost, while at the same time their association with these symbols lowers the value of them in the eyes of others.

The problem of social decline has been discussed in the literature with reference to a wide variety of groups; the Aristocracy in the Third Republic of France and the American white-collar worker are two examples. The scope of these matters has usually been thought of as broad enough to warrant historical treatment.
2. RISING GROUPS: Many societies have faced somewhat similar problems due to the development of new sources of status and to the quick rise to power of new groups. Typically, new sources permit the acquisition of costly symbols long before those based upon cultivation can be acquired. This tends to induce in the rising group expectations which for a time are not justified, as well as the devaluation of costly symbols in the eyes of members of other groups. (1)

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1 This has been referred to as the problem of the "Nouveau Riche", of which the community of Hollywood provides a nice example. See, Leo Rosten, Hollywood, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1941), especially pp. 153-180. The extreme case is the decrease in general value of certain status symbol (such as expensive cars) as a result of patronage by professional criminals.
3. CURATOR GROUPS: Wherever the symbolizing equipment of a group becomes elaborate, a "curator" personnel may develop whose task it is to care for, cultivate, sustain and develop this symbolizing equipment. Personnel of this kind include such categories as servants, actors, fashion models, interior decorators and architects. Those who fill these jobs are typically recruited from classes which have much less status than the class to which such services are offered. Thus, there are people whose everyday work requires them to become proficient in the use of symbols which signify a status higher than the one they themselves possess. Here, then, we have an institutionalized source of misrepresentation, false expectation and dissensus.\textsuperscript{1}

It is necessary to add here that either the framework presented in this paper is inadequate for the study of curator groups, or the study of these groups inevitably leads to grave difficulties. Arachnologically, it would seem that a specialist in the status symbolism of a group plays much the same sacred role as one who is entrusted with the collective symbols of the group. This is especially true

\textsuperscript{1}For example, see, K.H. Hall, The Nursemaid, (Unpublished M.A. thesis, Dept. of Sociology, University of Chicago, 1931), p. 171.
when the symbol-vehicle has a large expressive component. We propose an attempt to deal with this problem in a future paper on the rise and function of a National system of esteem.
4: CIRCULATION OF SYMBOLS: In any society, and in ours especially, there is a tendency for mechanisms of restriction to be circumvented or, in other words, for symbols to circulate downward. It would be extremely interesting but beyond the scope of this paper to inquire into the nature of these circumventory techniques or into the changes required in the intrinsic structure of a status symbol in order that it may circulate downward or upward.

From the point of view of organization and disorganization, the circulation of symbols has two consequences. First, those from whom a symbol originates must turn from that which is familiar to them and seek out, again and again, something which is not yet contaminated. This may be seen, for instance, in the need apparently felt by Jazz musicians to drop from the vocabulary of their action and speech those items which laymen have appropriated.

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2 I have collected from the mass media some data on the general problem of "Vulgarization", and propose to report on it in the Spring Quarter.

3 From conversations with Howard Becker.
The second consequence is perhaps the more significant of the two. Status symbols provide the cues that people regularly use to one another's status. Hence, the conscious life of the members of a society tends to concentrate upon these symbols. However, vehicles to which the power of signifying status is attached, frequently embody an expression of the way of life associated with the status signified. Thus, as it were, the consciousness of people is made to turn in upon the pattern of their own behavior, coming to play upon a representation or enactment of the things which are important to them. This form of reaffirmation induces solidarity in the group and a kind of richness to the psychic life of its members.

However, as a result of downward or upward circulation a symbol which is expressive for one group may come to be employed by a different group, a group for which it can signify status but hardly express it. In this way, the conscious life of the members may come to dwell upon that which is not particularly congenial to them.¹

¹See, for example, the short-lived role of Cricket in Chicago Society, and the comments on this sport in George Orwell, Dickens, Dalí and Others, (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1946), pp. 204-205.