

CLASS AND COMMITTEES IN A NORWEGIAN ISLAND PARISH¹

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When we study the social organization of a simple society, we aim at comprehending all the various ways in which the members of the society systematically interact with one another. For purposes of analysis we treat the political system, the pattern of village life, the system of kinship and affinity, and other similar areas of interaction as parts of the same universe of discourse, as though they were of equal analytical status, and we strive to show how the same external factors, principles of organization, and common values influence these different divisions of social life. This task, though always difficult, has been accomplished for a growing number of simple societies, about which we can feel confident that we have an appreciation of what the society *as a whole* is like. When we turn to the enormously complex societies of Western civilization our task becomes much more difficult. Fieldwork in a Western community can lead directly to knowledge of only a very small sector in the social life of a large-scale society. This limited area of detailed knowledge has then to be related, as best we can, to experience and information derived from other parts of the society.

Recently I had the opportunity of studying a parish in Western Norway called Bremnes.² During my fieldwork I did not try to gain first-hand knowledge of Norwegian society as a whole. Any such attempt would, I think, have been entirely unsuccessful. Instead I attempted to isolate for study certain aspects of social life in which I was interested, which were relatively unknown, and relatively easy to grapple with. Many writers have

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2. I carried out this work during 1952-3 as a Simon Research Fellow of the University of Manchester. I am much indebted to the University for its generous support, and also to St. John's College, Cambridge, who elected me to a Fellowship. My work was made possible only by the whole-hearted cooperation of many men and women in Bremnes, for which I am most grateful.

discussed the political history of Norway, the development of its economic institutions, the personality of its inhabitants, their forms of religious belief, and similar topics. Some sociological fieldwork has been carried out in the country, but as yet very little is known about the operation of the social class system in a land which prides itself on its affirmation of social equality. Therefore I decided to concentrate my attention on those kinds of face-to-face relationships through which a class system, if there were one, might operate. I was also interested in the way in which collective action is organized in a society of this kind, and was therefore led to consider the working of committees. I chose to study an island parish partly dependent on industry since I believed that there the field data I sought would be easier both to obtain and to understand than in a town.

Bremnes has a domiciled population of some 4,600. Of every ten men over fifteen years old, three are engaged mainly in fishing, two in agriculture, another two in industry, and one is a merchant seaman. These occupations account for 84 per cent of the adult male population. Another 6 per cent are gainfully employed in other occupations, and the final 10 per cent are retired. The majority of adult women are housewives. These percentages indicate only the principal occupation, for many men divide their time between different ways of earning a living. All farms are small, very few employ paid labour, and few households can live off their land alone. Therefore most peasants spend at least the time from Christmas to Easter fishing for herring, while others work in the local marine-engine factory. A few men are almost full-time administrators, but the bulk of the work of local government is carried out by part-time officials such as the mayor, the parish treasurer, the tax assessors and collectors, and the chairmen of the various standing committees, most of whom have small-holdings as well as their public work to attend to.

Bremnes is part of Norway, and its inhabitants share much of their culture with their fellow countrymen, as well as belonging with them to a single economic, social, and administrative system. Here it is sufficient to mention that Norway is a democratic monarchy with high taxation and comparatively little extremes of poverty and wealth. Over 95 per cent of Norwegians belong to the Lutheran State church. There is no tradition of feudalism, there are no hereditary titles outside the royal family, and virtually all children attend the official elementary schools. An idea strongly stressed in Norwegian thought is that no man should have more privileges than his fellows.

II

Each person in Bremnes belongs to many social groups. In particular he is a member of a household, of a hamlet, of a ward, and he is a member of the parish of Bremnes. At different times and different places membership of

one or other of these groups is definitive for what he does. He goes to the prayer-house with his household, sits at weddings with other members of his hamlet, and pays tax according to his parish. There are other series of groups which to some extent cut across these territorially-based ones, although they may themselves be based on territory. Thus for example a man may belong to a hamlet missionary working-party, or to a bull-owning cooperative based on a ward. In formal terms these various groups fit one inside the other, each in its own series. Thus there are three territorially-defined fishermen's associations in the parish. All three belong to the provincial fishermen's association, and this in its turn forms part of the national association. There may be conflicts because of the duties and rights a person has in the various groups in any one series, and there may be conflicts because of his interests in different series. This is true of all societies.

The territorial arrangement of the Bremnes population is fairly stable. The same fields are cultivated year after year, and new land comes into cultivation only slowly. Houses can be moved from site to site, but this is expensive. Land can be bought and sold, but there are several factors tending to discourage frequent sales of land. Thus for the most part the same people go on living in the same houses and cultivating the same land from year to year. This provides, as it were, a stable environment in which social relations are maintained through the decades, and a frame of reference by which individuals can relate themselves to other people. This territorially-based arrangement of persons is, however, only a part of the social system of Bremnes, for men utilize the sea as well as the land. Herring are not cultivated, they are hunted. They are taken from the sea, where there are no territorially defined rights in property. They are caught by men organized in groups of from five to twenty, whose composition varies from year to year much more than do the household groups who work together on the same holding. The fishing vessel, the temporary home of the fishermen, wears out more quickly than a house or a plot of land, and it can be bought and sold comparatively easily. Even more important, there are no women on board. Wives and children remain behind and stay in one place while the men move from one fishing ground to another, and from one crew to another. Here then we have two distinct kinds of social field, a fluid and a stationary, and we shall presently discuss a third field linking these two. The fluid field is the field of industrial activity, in which men earn money by catching fish; the stable field is the field of domestic, agricultural, and administrative activity ashore, where they, or their wives, spend the money.

The Norwegian fishing industry is efficient; technological change is going on continually, and vessels make use of modern equipment like radio telephones, echo-sounding gear, nylon ropes, radar and asdics. It is a highly competitive industry, each vessel striving against all other vessels. Loyalties to kinsmen, neighbours and friends continue to operate, but only to a limited extent. In their own words, "Herring fishing is war." Any man can try to

get himself included in a crew and each owner seeks to engage the crew that will catch most fish. During the herring season, men from Bremnes sail in vessels belonging to other parishes, and vessels registered in Bremnes sometimes have on board fishermen from as much as six hundred miles away. In effect, there is something like a free labour market. Men apply for a place in a particular vessel because of contacts they have made, friends or relatives who have already served on board, or the success of the vessel in previous seasons.

An industry of this kind could scarcely operate were the pattern of social relations as fixed and stable as it is in the round of social and economic activities ashore. The greater portion of the herring catch is exported and in order to sell on the world market at a profit the size of the fishing fleet and the amount of capital invested in it have to respond to economic pressures which vary in intensity and point of application. There is a huge marketing organization and various reserve funds which even out part of the differences in earnings between one vessel and another and from year to year. Even so, the amounts earned by the fleet as a whole vary considerably over the seasons, and in any year some crews do very well while others barely earn any money at all. Most of the tasks in fishing can be carried out by any able-bodied man brought up by the sea, so that men can move fairly easily from fishing into other occupations and back again. From the point of view of the individual fisherman, therefore, the herring-fishing industry is intersected by a social field through which he can move fairly freely along lines of friendship and local knowledge, seeking in the main the achievement of economic goals. Every man is in touch, or can put himself in touch, with a large number of other men, differentiated into shipowners, skippers, net bosses, cooks and others, and into good and bad, and to whom he is linked in a variety of ways. The herring-fishing industry also generates its own social field which is influenced by ecological factors, such as the disappearance of the fish, by economic factors affecting alternative opportunities for employment and investment, and by many others. It is a social field only partly made up of an arrangement of lasting social groups.

Thus in terms of this analysis we can isolate three regions or fields in the social system of Bremnes. Firstly there is the territorially-based social field, with a large number of enduring administrative units, arranged hierarchially, one within another. The administration of the parish is carried on through this system, and the same boundaries are used by the voluntary associations. By reason of their physical proximity the smaller territorial units, the hamlets and wards, provide the basis for enduring social relations between neighbours, which find expression in various activities connected with subsistence agriculture, the care of children, religion, entertainment, and the like. The units of the system endure and membership changes only slowly.

The second social field is that generated by the industrial system. Here we have a large number of interdependent, yet formally autonomous units

such as fishing vessels, marketing cooperatives, and herring-oil factories, connected with each other functionally rather than hierarchically, yet each organized internally in a hierarchy of command. These units, which often are true social groupings as well as units of organization, do not necessarily persist through time, nor does their membership remain fixed.

The third social field has no units or boundaries; it has no coordinating organization. It is made up of the ties of friendship and acquaintance which everyone growing up in Bremnes society partly inherits and largely builds up for himself. Some of the ties are between kinsmen. A few of them are between people who are not equals, as between a man and a former employer with whom he has kept in contact. Most of the ties are, however, between persons who accord approximately equal status to one another, and it is these ties which, I think, may be said to constitute the class system of Bremnes. The elements of this social field are not fixed, for new ties are continually being formed and old links are broken or put into indefinite cold storage.

Let us examine more closely the distinctive features of this third social field. As we well know, cognatic kinship does not of itself give rise to enduring social groups. I have my cousins and sometimes we all act together; but they have their own cousins who are not mine and so on indefinitely. Each individual generates his own set of cognatic kin and in general the set he and his siblings generate is not the same as that generated by anyone else. Each person is, as it were, in touch with a number of other people, some of whom are directly in touch with each other and some of whom are not. Similarly each person has a number of friends, and these friends have their own friends; some of any one person's friends know each other, others do not. I find it convenient to talk of a social field of this kind as a *network*.³ The image I have is of a set of points some of which are joined by lines. The points of the image are people, or sometimes groups, and the lines indicate which people interact with each other. We can of course think of the whole of social life as generating a network of this kind. For our present purposes, however, I want to consider, roughly speaking, that part of the total network that is left behind when we remove the groupings and chains of interaction which belong strictly to the territorial and industrial systems. In Bremnes society, what is left is largely, though not exclusively, a network of ties of kinship, friendship, and neighbourhood. This network runs across the whole of society and does not stop at the parish boundary. It links Bremnes folk with their kinsmen and friends in other parishes as well as knitting them together within the parish. A network of this kind has no external boundary,

3. Earlier I used the term *web*, taken from the title of M. Fortes' book, *The web of kinship*. However, it seems that many people think of a web as something like a spider's web, in two dimensions, whereas I am trying to form an image for a multi-dimensional concept. It is merely a generalization of a pictographic convention which genealogists have used for centuries on their pedigree charts. Recent modifications of this convention include the tribal "sequences" in W. E. Armstrong, *Rossel Island* (1928), p. 37; "psychological geography" in J. L. Moreno, *Who shall survive?* (1934), pp. 238-47; and "sets" in E. D. Chapple and C. S. Coon, *Principles of anthropology* (1942), p. 284.

nor has it any clear-cut internal divisions, for each person sees himself at the centre of a collection of friends. Certainly there are clusters of people who are more closely knit together than others, but in general the limits of these clusters are vague. Indeed, one of the ways in which a cluster of people emphasize their exclusiveness is to form a group, to which one definitely either does or does not belong. The social ties linking the members of the group are then no longer merely those of kinship or friendship.

In parenthesis we may note that one of the principal formal differences between simple, primitive, rural or small-scale societies as against modern, civilized, urban or mass societies is that in the former the mesh of the social network is small, in the latter it is large. By mesh I mean simply the distance round a hole in the network. In modern society, I think we may say that in general people do not have as many friends in common as they do in small-scale societies. When two people meet for the first time, it is rare in modern society for them to discover that they have a large number of common friends, and when this does happen it is regarded as something exceptional and memorable. In small-scale societies I think this happens more frequently, and strangers sometimes find that they have kinsmen in common. In terms of our network analogy, in primitive society many of the possible paths leading away from any *A* lead back again to *A* after a few links; in modern society a smaller proportion lead back to *A*. In other words, suppose that *A* interacts with *B* and that *B* interacts with *C*. Then in a primitive society the chances are high that *C* interacts with *A*, in a modern society the chances are small. This fact is of considerable practical importance for the study of societies by the traditional techniques of social anthropology, when we try to become acquainted with a limited number of persons whom we observe interacting one with another in a variety of roles. In a modern society, each individual tends to have a different audience for each of the roles he plays. Bremnes, in these terms, is an intermediate society.

In some societies close kinsmen and affines are not necessarily social equals, and in that case the network of kinship ties may have a steep social gradient. Similarly, in our own society, in a street with property ranging gradually from mansions at one end to tenements at the other, we can speak of a network of ties between neighbours who do not regard themselves as equal in social status. However, in Bremnes, as in many other societies, kinsmen, by and large, are approximate social equals. Furthermore, at the present time, unlike conditions which prevailed in Bremnes until about a hundred years ago, neighbours are approximately equal in social status. In Norwegian thought, the idea of equality is emphasized, so that even between persons of markedly different economic status there is less recognition of social inequality on either side than would, I think, be the case in Britain. Thus the social network in Bremnes is largely a system of ties between pairs of persons who regard each other as approximate social equals.

III

The organization of the population of Norway into social classes, assuming that there is such an organization, may be said to manifest itself in Bremnes in the social network I have described. The term *social class* is widely used in general conversation, and naturally it has a great variety of meanings. I think that much of the confusion that has grown up around the term is due to our failure to distinguish these different usages. Thus Marx had in mind definite groups into which the population was divided, which were mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive, endured through at least several decades, and which recruited members by reference to their position in the economic system. The study of class through clique membership, on the other hand, is closer to the idea of class as a network. For instance, in *Deep South*⁴ a series of overlapping cliques are used to define the boundaries of class. Most other approaches to class treat it as a kind of social category, of people possessing approximately the same size of house, or paid about the same amount, or standing at about the same level on some commonly-held scale of social esteem. Lastly there is class as a category of thought, a unit of division used when members of a society mentally divide up the population into status categories. It is clear that the question "How many classes are there?" is meaningless when applied to class as a social category, for there are as many or as few as we choose; and there is often no consensus within a society about class as a category of thought. There may be disagreement about the number of social classes when class is treated as a social group, in the same way as there are disagreements about how many genera and how many species there are in zoological taxonomy; but that is a problem that can be solved. When, however, we look at social class as a kind of network, the question of how many social classes there are falls away completely.

I should perhaps emphasize that the concept of a network is only one tool for use in the analysis of the phenomenon of social class. The other approaches I have mentioned above are equally valid, and indeed are necessary to any understanding of this complex social fact. As we are well aware, there is a fair measure of congruence between the different approaches. In general, most of a man's friends have approximately the same income as he has, live in the same sort of house, are classified together by other members of the society, and fight on the same side in those political and industrial struggles in which, if at all, social classes may perhaps be said to function as groups. For the purposes of this paper I shall nevertheless look at social class from merely the one point of view: as a network of relations between pairs of persons according each other approximately equal status.

4. A. Davis, B. B. Gardner, and M. R. Gardner, *Deep South* (1941). For a critique of the class concept from a logician's standpoint, see Llewellyn Gross, "The use of class concepts in sociological research", *American Journal of Sociology*, liv (1948-9), pp. 400-21.

This choice is not entirely an arbitrary one. It arises from the fact that Bremnes is a fairly small community, with no marked differences of culture and, with a few exceptions, minor differences in standards of dress, housing, and the like. In common parlance, there are few class differences in the parish. There are significant differences in income, but these are partly rendered inoperative by the lack of significant differences in patterns of spending. Under these conditions we do not find the emergence of a division of the population into distinct social classes one above the other.

It should be clear that such a division is not ruled out by the idea of class as a network. It is only pairs of persons who are directly in contact with one another in the class network who regard themselves as approximately of equal status; each person does not necessarily regard everyone else in the network as his equal. Suppose that *A* has a friend *B*. *A* regards *B* as his social equal, perhaps a little higher or a little lower in social status. As we have remarked earlier, not all *B*'s friends are friends of *A*. Suppose that *D* is a friend of *B*, but not a friend of *A*. Then, if *A* knows of *D* at all, he may or may not regard him as his social equal. If, for instance, *A* regards *B* as slightly beneath him in social status, but not so far below as to matter; and if *B* regards *D* in the same light; then there is the possibility that *A* will regard *D* as too far below him to be treated on a basis of equality. Similarly if *A* is below *B* and *B* is below *D*, *A* may think that *D* is too far above him to be treated as an equal. This process is cumulative with every step taken along the network away from any *A* we chose to start from. Thus for every individual *A* the whole of the network, or at least that part of it of which he is aware, is divided into three areas or sets of points. One of these sets consists of all those people to whom *A* is linked by a longer or shorter path, and whom *A* regards as his social equals. *A* is similarly linked to each person in the second set, but this set is composed of all the people that *A* regards as his social superiors. Similarly the people who in *A*'s estimation are his social inferiors form the third set. These sets are like the sets of cousins we mentioned earlier, in that membership of the sets has to be defined afresh for each new individual *A* that we choose to consider. Thus in the example given above, *D* belongs to the superior set with reference to *A*, but to the socially-equal set with reference to *B*. I think that in some, at least, of the many instances in which people of widely-varying economic position say that they belong to the middle class in a system of three (or more) social classes, they are merely stating that they are aware of the existence of these three sets of persons. It does not of itself imply that society can be divided into three groups with agreed membership.

I do not wish to digress further with the elaboration of this model of a class system. The idea has been developed sufficiently to deal with the comparatively simple conditions prevailing in Bremnes. In the first place, Bremnes is small, with a great deal of intermarriage. Hence in the network the number of links along the path joining any two members of the parish

is small, probably never more than four. Secondly, because Norwegian culture is egalitarian, everyone is ready to treat as an equal others whose income, upbringing, interests, and occupation differ widely from his own. Thirdly, despite the egalitarian dogma, people in Bremnes recognize the existence of differences in social status. They have stereotypes of the upper class who live in big houses in the towns, talk a different language, and have different religious beliefs. Bremnes folk also speak of a lower class, people who wander about unashamed, living on charity and scorning the aspirations of respectable citizens. In between these two classes are "plain ordinary people like ourselves". It is, in fact, the familiar egocentric three-class system, with ego in the middle class. Class is here a category of thought. In Bremnes, conditions are simplified in that, for the most part, everyone appears to think of almost everybody else in the parish as belonging to the same class as himself. Most people in the upper and lower classes, as defined by Bremnes folk, live outside the parish. When they visit the parish, members of these classes are treated by most of the resident population either as social superiors or inferiors, and not as equals.

Within the parish community, the range of variation is just sufficient for a few people, perhaps a dozen or so in number, to be regarded by many others as on the upper fringe of their sets of social equals. Yet others treat these dozen persons as social superiors. Similarly, there are a few people who are, in rather oblique fashion, treated as social inferiors by many in the community. However, this recognition of social inferiority is often masked, since it is impolite for anyone to show openly that he considers himself superior to anyone else.

The range of status variation is likely to increase in the future. In the community, some men are wealthier than others and although they only occasionally use their wealth to buy socially conspicuous goods and services such as cars, large houses, expensive clothes, pleasure yachts, and the like, they do buy more expensive education for their children. Up to the age of fourteen all children receive the same education in the parish schools, but it is the sons and daughters of the wealthier section of the population who, in the main, continue their education for a few years more. For many youngsters, this means leaving the parish and coming into contact with ideas and values different from those they have known at home. They acquire skills which, when they leave school, differentiate them from the majority of the labouring population, and which in a generation or two may well lead to sharper cleavages along class lines, or at least to a recognition of wider differences in social position. Similarly, on evidence from other parts of Norway, I think that the people lowest in the Bremnes social scale, most of whom are itinerant pedlars and beggars, are now more sharply distinguished from the rest of the population they were a hundred years ago, when many penurious cottars and day labourers lived in the parish; but I cannot document this for Bremnes.

Although there is this tendency towards greater differentiation in social status, it is slowed down by other social processes. Taxation is high, so that it is difficult for a man to amass a fortune, and since capital is taxed as well as income, it is also difficult for him to retain it. As part of the culturally-supported thesis that all should be treated alike, it is universally held that all children should inherit equally. Only a third of a man's wealth can legally be disposed of by will; the remainder must be distributed according to the laws of inheritance or intestacy. In Bremnes few wills are made and in nearly every case all a man's chattels, after provision has been made for his widow, are divided equally among his children. Thus in a society of large families, fortunes are dispersed at death. Even death duties operate differentially on the principle of "he that already hath more shall receive less". Where land is concerned, one child often takes over the whole of his or her father's farm, but even then he (or she) has to buy the land from the father so that the rights of the landless siblings may be protected. In education, inequalities of opportunity are to some extent offset by bursaries and interest-free loans from official sources, and by the custom of allowing adolescents to work for a year or two so that they can save enough to take themselves through the next stage of their education. All these factors hinder the speedy development of wide social differences even though the trend seems to be in that direction.

Thus in general terms we can say that in Bremnes society, apart from the territorial and industrial systems, there is a network of social ties between pairs of persons arising from considerations of kinship, friendship and acquaintance. Most, but not all, of these ties are between persons who regard each other as approximate social equals, and these ties of approximate equality we regard as one manifestation of the social class system, and shall call the class network. Although each link in the class network is one of approximate social equality, not everyone in the network regards everyone else as his equal, and there are a few people in the parish who are regarded by many others, but not by all, as belonging to a higher class. The class network is utilized for carrying out social activities, such as mutual help and home entertaining; class ties and also ties between people of recognized unequal status are used by men for a variety of other purposes, for example, to find places for themselves in the fishing industry.

IV

Cooperative activity requires some degree of leadership and consensus, whether carried out by enduring groups or by ephemeral groupings of persons linked by a network of social ties. Let us now consider some of the mechanisms by which leadership and consensus are obtained in Bremnes social life. Characteristically a network has no head and, as I have here used the term, no centre and no boundaries either. It is not a corporate body, but

rather a system of social relations through which many individuals carry on certain activities which are only indirectly coordinated with one another. In Bremnes, as we have seen, there is little class distinction, but the social activities which are typically carried on through the system of social class are there carried on in the same way as in a society with a larger range of class variation. People invite their friends to supper, or to a sewing party for the mission, or for a shooting trip, on the same basis of apparent approximate equality of social status, which is, I think, definitive of class behaviour. The network of friendship and acquaintance, when men seek out industrial opportunities, is used rather differently. Fish are actually caught, and a large number of distinct activities are brought into close coordination with one another. While fishing, men are no longer equals; they are organized in chains of command and differentiated according to function. For as long as the technical process demands, they are organized in fixed groups standing in a definite relationship one to another. At sea the skipper is in charge of his vessel, the coxswain in charge of his boat; they give orders and their subordinates obey. In the same way the marine-engine factory is organized hierarchically for purposes of production, with a board of directors, managers, foremen, and workmen. The groups of men who are thrown together on board fishing vessels or in the sections of the factory develop and perpetuate other modes of interaction which modify the configurations of the class network besides affecting the productive tasks themselves. In Homans' terminology, there is a clear-cut hierarchically organized external system, whereas the internal system is the network of friendship and acquaintance.⁵

Once we leave the field of organized industrial enterprise, the need for quick decisions and for a clear division of responsibility decreases. The achievement of consensus is valued more highly than speed of autocratic command. Decisions have to be made involving collective action: whether the teachers shall have salmon or cod at their banquet; whether the electricity supply cooperative shall take action against a member who has tampered with his meter; whether a boatload of fishermen shall go ashore to the cinema or to the prayer-ship. Such decisions are important, but their importance lies more in their consequences for face-to-face relations between members of the society than in their technical merits. Hence it is not surprising that the process of reaching the decision to hold a feast in the prayer-house is more complicated than that by which a command is given to cast a net in the sea. This is true whether the prayer-house is one belonging to a local community or to the hierarchically-organized factory.

Yet, as is usual in the Western world, most of the formal associations in Bremnes concerned with non-industrial activities have what appears on paper to be an hierarchical structure suitable for taking quick decisions in an autocratic way. There is, it is true, no one person in Bremnes who is head of

5. G. C. Homans, *The Human Group* (1951), pp. 273 ff.

local society, who might be called the chief of the island, but equally Bremnes is not a leaderless society. It is, as we say, a democracy, and there is a common pattern of organization which occurs in nearly every instance of formal social life. Each association has a committee, with powers to act usually for a year but sometimes for longer, elected by an annual general meeting. The committee, if it is big enough, elects a quarter of its members to an executive council to which most of its powers are delegated. The council and the committee each elect one of their members to be treasurer and secretary. The same man is often chairman of committee and council. There is also a deputy chairman and a number of deputy members who function only in the absence of the principal members. This common pattern is followed with only minor variations by sports clubs, missionary societies, producers' co-operatives, and by the local government itself.

All these bodies employ the same procedure for reaching a decision, by simple majority vote of those present and voting, provided there is a quorum. In practice, whenever possible they avoid taking a vote and the great majority of collective decisions are therefore unanimous. This tendency is most marked at the meetings of missionary societies and least at those of the parish council. Even in the parish council, when there is an irreconcilable division of opinion this is sometimes concealed by first taking a trial vote, to decide which view has greatest support; this is followed by a confirming unanimous vote, which alone is recorded in the minutes. Nevertheless there are in fact continual differences of opinion between members of all these different bodies. Why then is the achievement of formally unanimous decisions considered so important? Here I think we are dealing with a principle of fairly wide application. People living and working together inevitably have conflicting interests but in general they have also a common interest in the maintenance of existing social relations. Individual goals must be attained through socially approved processes, and as far as possible the illusion must be maintained that each individual is acting only in the best interests of the community. As far as possible, that is, the group must appear united, not only vis-à-vis other similar groups, but also to itself. Voting is a method of reaching decisions in which divergence of interest is openly recognized, and in which the multiplicities of divergence are forced into the Procrustean categories of *Yes* and *No*. Significantly, voting is rare in simple societies and in small groups of modern society. Membership in a collectivity implies accepting a share in the collective responsibility for the group's actions as well as a share in the decision to act in a certain way. The local associations in Bremnes are in the main face-to-face groups operating in a conservative environment. Even the producers' co-operatives, which had been responsible for introducing technological changes, are made up of men who have been neighbours for many years, who are related by kinship and marriage, and who are not trying to alter the existing pattern of social relations on the island, even though they may be trying to alter the position of the islanders

as against the rest of the region. In these conditions voting is an inappropriate procedure.

Furthermore, in voting, the worth of one man relative to another is fixed, and in most voting systems all men have equal votes. When decisions are reached unanimously after discussion, each man gives his own weight to the views of his fellows. Individuals present their views as though they had first been stated by someone else; they speak tentatively and cautiously; they try to win the support of divergent colleagues by saying that they agree with them all. The complex process by which a final decision is reached without the cleavages in the group becoming irreconcilable is one that I am not competent to analyse fully. The process is in part a corollary of the emphasis on equality that is noticeable in Norwegian culture. What is significant for our purposes is that it is a recognizable process which goes on in some social contexts and not in others.

There is one context in which voting by secret ballot is almost invariably used. When new committee members and officers have to be elected, pieces of paper are handed round, everyone writes down his choices and folds over his paper before handing it in. Thus the only topic that never comes up for open discussion is the relative worth of members of the community. I think there are two reasons for this. The election of committee members is the one occasion at which an immediate decision is absolutely necessary to prevent the structure of the association collapsing. Secondly it is difficult, though not impossible, to discuss the merits and demerits of one's friends in their presence without committing oneself so much that the appearance of general amity is threatened. As it is, most elections to local committees in Norway consist of re-voting into office the outgoing members, and sometimes a special sub-committee is appointed to draw up in private a list of nominations, so that voting becomes a formality. In this way the rivalries that threaten the unity of the community are hindered from coming into the open. In Bremnes there is, however, often free discussion about who should serve on those committees involving more hard work than honour.

The parish council differs from the other associations on the island in that it is required to act and cannot be merely a mutual admiration society. It is the local government in a society that is changing, even though it is changing fairly slowly. The leaky church roof must be repaired, and as the population increases more classrooms must be built. The council is under constant pressure from the provincial administration to collect taxes and to spend the money collected. Unlike the missionary societies and chess club and women's institutes, the parish council obtains a large part of the revenue for its projects from the State, and higher authorities audit its accounts, approve its budget, and bombard it with correspondence. It may try to move slowly, but it is continually forced to come to a decision one way or the other on issues about which the community has not yet made up its mind, that is to say, about which there are differences of opinion that have not yet been resolved.

Hence from time to time a vote must be taken. The usual techniques, or as some would say, tricks, are used by the mayor to gain unanimous approval, such as, for example, making the majority record their vote by remaining seated and the minority by standing up; all those who are in two minds about the issue probably fail to spring to their feet. In the same way, members of council try to avoid having to vote on matters in which they have divided loyalties, claiming that because of ties of kinship and affinity they are likely to be biased and therefore cannot discuss a particular matter fairly. On one occasion I observed, when an unusually controversial matter was up for discussion and three members had, one after the other, spoken briefly to say that they were related to the parties in the case and therefore could not take part in the discussion, the mayor intervened to point out that council members were probably all related in one way or another to the parties concerned, but that nevertheless they must come to a decision. Where associations other than the parish council are concerned, such embarrassing situations can usually be avoided. There is no State administrative machinery behind them to keep them going at all costs, and if serious latent differences are allowed to become apparent, the organizations may split.

Formal associations in Bremnes, despite their hierarchical form of organization, are not authoritarian. The existing structure of social relations in a conservative environment is maintained by seeking for apparent agreement for all decisions. With the parish council, speed of decision is more important and voting is more often employed. In industrial enterprises, both in the marine-engine factory and the fishing industry, where the environment is not conservative and quick decisions are needed, there is an hierarchical structure and this is effective and not merely formal.

V

Although there are many leaders of part of the parish, each of whom operates in certain restricted contexts, there is no overall leadership of the parish valid in a wide range of contexts, such as we are familiar with in the primitive world. We might perhaps call the pattern of public life in Bremnes "government by committee". In formal terms there are no long chains of command on the island. Instead there is a host of small organized groups with overlapping membership, and the whole population is enmeshed in a close web of kinship and friendship which links together all the people on the island, but which also ties them to kinsmen and affines scattered throughout Western Norway, and indeed throughout the whole world. In this system the people formally in positions of leadership are the elected chairmen of the various associations. They hold office for a fixed term but are very often re-elected unless they decide to resign. There are perhaps fifty voluntary associations of one kind or another, as well as about forty standing committees whose members are appointed or recommended for nomination by

the parish council. All these men occupy positions of some public responsibility. Slightly more in the public eye are the mayor, the rector and his curate, and the sheriff. None of these men can be said to represent the parish in its totality to the outside world, and all of them are involved with fractional interests within the parish. The sheriff and the rector are perhaps most removed from internal rivalries, but even they take part in politics, although they are civil servants and directly responsible to higher authorities outside the parish. The holders of both these offices stood as parliamentary candidates in the recent election. They are both elected parish councillors and members of various parish council committees in their own right as well as being *ex-officio* members of other committees. Even more involved in local politics are the mayor and the chairmen of standing committees.

In fact there are no living symbols of parish unity, or of the relation of the parish to other social groups, in any but a restricted sense. There is no one person in a key position who articulates the parish with a wider social system as happens in many simple societies. The mayor comes nearest to this, for he represents the parish on the provincial council, and is sometimes invited to serve as a director on the boards of public utility companies serving the parish. Yet even so he is not the representative of the parish in ecclesiastical or judicial matters or in the affairs of the missionary societies. This lack of a single leader or symbolic head is perhaps due to the fact that the parish is not a corporate group in the same way that, for instance, a minor lineage is a corporate group among the Tallensi.⁶ Bremnes is a parish, a unit of civil and ecclesiastical administration and part of the Kingdom of Norway. Yet even in civil and ecclesiastical affairs the parish looks outward in different directions. Ecclesiastically Bremnes is part of Finnås parish union, which is part of Ytre Sunnhordland archdeaconry, which is part of Bjørgvin diocese; in civil matters Bremnes is an immediate subdivision of Hordaland province; while in judicial affairs it forms part of Finnås sheriff's area, which is part of Sunnhordland magistracy. One hundred and fifty years ago Norway was still virtually a Danish colony governed by what we would now call a system of direct bureaucratic rule. The various sections of the bureaucracy were largely separate and the local areas into which the country was divided for different purposes then coincided even less than they do now. During the nineteenth century, as the local population gained a greater share in public affairs, changes were made to bring the ecclesiastical, administrative, fiscal, and judicial divisions into alignment, but the coincidence is still not complete. Indeed the trend is now in the opposite direction, as new systems of organization cut across existing alignments, as for example the Home Guard and the electricity supply grid. The parish is a unit in some of these different organizations, but it is not an exogamous or endogamous unit; it is not an economic unit, and from most points of view it has no culture of its own. Its nearest

6. M. Fortes, *The Dynamics of Clanship among the Tallensi* (1945), p. 99.

approach to a social centre is the parish church, and it is here that the largest crowds gather, that common beliefs are affirmed, and changes in social life receive public recognition. Yet the church is not as widely supported an institution as it once was and its sphere of influence has considerably diminished. Although the process of social specialization has not gone as far in Bremnes as it has, say, in a London suburb, Bremnes is definitely not a simple society. The systems of organization within which the people carry on their activities are not congruent with one another. Neighbours, kinsfolk, work-mates, fellow members of associations, are all becoming different.

In general, the mesh of the social network is growing larger. Nevertheless, the organization of Bremnes society is still largely an arrangement of cross-cutting ties and groupings in which not only friends and enemies, but also leaders and followers, are inextricably mixed. No one line of cleavage ever becomes dominant. The territorial system endures and the industrial system commands; but in this society the relationships that are valued most highly are still to be found in the shifting middle ground of social intercourse between approximate equals.

VI

So far we have looked at Bremnes society as an isolated object of study. In conclusion I want very briefly to consider Bremnes in relation to other similar societies. In reality Bremnes is not an isolated society, and there is the large descriptive and analytical problem of understanding the relationship between Bremnes and neighbouring parishes, and between it and the Norwegian State. These problems I shall not deal with here. The problem I want to glance at is a morphological one, of seeing Bremnes as an example of a particular type of society.

The centuries of development, and of stagnation, that lie behind the Bremnes society described in this paper can be summarized as follows. From A.D. 600 until 1300, during the Viking Age and later, the Norwegian State expanded to include all Norway, Iceland, and part of Sweden, with colonies further afield in Scotland, Ireland, the Isle of Man, and Greenland. From 1300 onwards the State declined under pressure from Denmark, Sweden and the Hanscatic League, and suffered badly in the Black Death. In 1380 Norway was joined to Denmark by a dynastic marriage and gradually sank to the effective status of a Danish colony, with a peasantry living largely in a subsistence economy. The administration was carried on mainly by Danes; the Danish language was used exclusively for writing, and commercial and industrial development lagged behind that of Denmark. During the eighteenth century the bureaucracy in Norway began to concern itself with the development of Norwegian, as distinct from Danish, culture and began to agitate for a Norwegian university. There was a considerable divergence of economic interest between Denmark and Norway, which was increased

by the vicissitudes of the Napoleonic Wars; communications with Denmark were cut by the British blockade and a Norwegian government was formed. In 1814 a constitution was drawn up, heavily influenced by the ideas of the American Constitution and the French Revolution. Instead of gaining independence the country was, however, joined in a dual monarchy with Sweden. After nearly a hundred years of political struggle this union was dissolved, without fighting, in 1905.

In Viking times all free men attended local assemblies with judicial and legislative authority and later there were higher assemblies made up of representatives of the various localities. In the twelfth century the assemblies began to lose their power, and control of local affairs passed to nominees of the king. Under Danish rule government became more bureaucratic, and the peasants, who provided the bulk of the army, had only the viceroy to protect them against the demands of the land-owning gentry and the Danish-speaking bureaucrats. In the eighteenth century much land passed back into peasant hands, but the common people remained unenfranchised. The 1814 constitution provided for a wide franchise and some wealthier peasants were elected to Parliament. It was, however, not until 1837 that a system of elective local government was introduced. Many of the first rural mayors were bureaucrats, such as priests, sheriffs and judges, but gradually more farmers and peasants were elected. The bureaucracy, which even in Danish times had theoretically been open to all, now began to have members of peasant origin. At the same time the status of the bureaucrats as leaders of local society declined and new positions of eminence appeared; the school teachers being perhaps the first group of mainly peasant origin to acquire semi-professional status.

In Danish times trade was carried on in the countryside by town burghers, but by the end of the nineteenth century there had been considerable inter-marriage between the peasantry and the children of burghers stationed out in the country, and some peasants had started small trading posts on their own initiative. The comparative paucity of capital for investment in the towns meant that small-scale rural enterprises were often started by wealthier peasants rather than by townfolk. At the same time the economy of the coastal region in the West, the part of Norway to which Bremnes belongs, underwent a change. Since time immemorial there had been fishing for the home market and for export, and as communications by sea and land improved this trade now expanded. Despite considerable set-backs the size of the catch increased over the years as more capital was invested in fishing vessels and nets. Down to the end of the nineteenth century most householders on this coast were both peasant and fisherman, but with the development of commercial fishing a division began to emerge between those who were mainly fishermen and those who were mainly peasants. A few fish salteries owned by town merchants and a few small boat-building yards were established rurally in the nineteenth century, and barrel-making flourished

as a cottage industry, yet it is only recently that large-scale rural industrial enterprises have become important in the economy of the fishing districts. There are now several canning factories scattered along the coast and, as electricity becomes more readily available, further industrial expansion is likely. Bremnes, with its marine-engine factory, is more industrialized and has been industrialized longer than many nearby parishes.

Thus a hundred and fifty years ago there were in each rural parish one or two bureaucrats living at a much higher standard than the rest of the population, speaking a different language, and moving from post to post without developing marked local affiliation. Below them in status were a few traders, usually burghers of a town; they had more local ties and were not so mobile as the bureaucrats. The rest of the population were peasants, with the freeholders occupying the highest stratum and accounting for about half of the peasantry. Next came the leaseholders, usually cultivating land owned by Danish-speaking gentry or by rich burghers. Under them came the cottars, or labour tenants, who worked so many days a year for the freeholders in return for the use of small holdings. Finally at the bottom of society were the landless labourers, the indigent, and vagrants. In this system the peasantry, although forming the great bulk of the rural population, had little say in public affairs, were undifferentiated in terms of occupation and culture, but were divided into ranks based on inherited rights in land. This system ended, and Norway became a quasi-independent State with elective local government largely as a result of international politics and social movements among the bureaucrats and in the towns, that is, as a result of social forces external to rural society. Nevertheless, after a generation or so, peasant leadership began to emerge, the old ranking system among peasants broke down; the status of the rural bureaucrats declined, and the rural economy became more diversified.

This sequence of events was in no sense the inevitable consequence of the ending of colonial rule, but it is clear that the break with Denmark supplied the initial impetus that started this train of events in Norway and even in Bremnes. It seems not improbable that similar events may have taken place in other former colonies. One of the major social movements of the twentieth century has been the partial breaking-up of those world-wide empires established by the Powers of Western Europe during the nineteenth century and earlier, and there are many older empires now long since fallen into decay. Yet the problem of the rural effect of political independence does not always receive the attention it merits. When a country achieves independence interest is at first naturally focused on transformations taking place at the centre and in the towns. When the colonial Power is driven out by armed insurrection or as the result of a long political battle, the struggle for liberation is at the same time the process by which a new *élite* is formed to take over from the old colonial governing class. This is presumably what happened in South America, and perhaps in Indonesia. In a large country the formation

of a new *élite* has greater social consequences for the towns and centres of government than it has for the countryside. In general colonial *élites* tend to concentrate in towns and military camps and are thinly spread throughout the rural areas. Hence the removal of the colonial Power may not at first have much effect on rural life. Liberation brings fresh faces in board-rooms and government offices, but the same people continue toiling in the fields. The ending of colonial government must of necessity bring about changes at the centre in the political structure of a new nation, but the effect rurally may be largely the replacement of, say, a White District Officer by a Black one. From the point of view of rural society the change to national political independence is then an event external to the system.

At other times the withdrawal of the colonial Power has been an event external to the social system of the colonial territory as a whole. An example of a withdrawal of this latter kind was the ending of Roman rule in Britain, when the critical conditions causing the withdrawal were to be found outside Britain. Yet, however remote from the rural areas may be the causes of colonial decline, in general the rural system will itself tend to change sooner or later. Occasionally rural change may precede political independence, as for instance in Israel, where for once we are fortunate in having more sociological information about rural conditions in transition than we have about changes at the centre. However, I think that we may say that usually the countryside lags behind the towns and the central institutions of a developing ex-colony, and changes in the pattern of rural life and family conditions come later and slower, if they come at all.

Thus, when a country is for one reason or another left to govern itself, the effect on the rural areas may be slight, delayed, or entirely lacking. A full discussion of why Bremnes society developed in the way it did cannot be attempted here. I would merely stress that the achievement of national independence was one factor of significance in that development and that the opportunities we have of studying the consequences of similar events in other rural areas should not be overlooked.

The vacuum caused by the withdrawal of a governing *élite* may initiate one social process, as we have seen in Bremnes with the gradual emergence of part-time peasants in key positions in the structure of government and organized social life. Industrialization is a quite distinct process which has occurred and is still proceeding in countries with widely varying forms of political institutions, some of them colonies, some former colonies, and others that have not experienced colonial status for many centuries. The evidence suggests that in all of these, whatever social system they have had in the past, some form of class society develops as industrialization proceeds; or, as I would rather say, that the emergent societies can at least be described partly in the imprecise vocabulary of social class. The process of industrialization has also begun in Bremnes, and is perhaps largely responsible for such gropings towards a class system as we have noted. Comparative evidence from other

societies at an early stage of industrialization, and from those in which new *élites* are being formed, may throw more light on the ways in which these two processes reinforce or neutralize one another.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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