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INSTITUTIONAL OFFICE AND THE PERSON

EVERETT C. HUGHES

ABSTRACT

Conscious fulfilling of formally defined offices distinguishes institutions from elementary collective behavior. In office, personal role and social status meet. In some offices, ritual is dominant; in others, judgment and enterprise are called for. A career is the person's sequence of role and realized status and office. In rigid societies, careers are of standard types; and each person's is somewhat predetermined. In a freer society, they are less so; but nevertheless, types of careers appear. The institutions of a society may not be understood without understanding offices and careers.

The conscious fulfilling of formally defined offices distinguishes social institutions from more elementary collective phenomena. This paper will discuss the nature of institutional offices and their relations to the peculiar roles and careers of persons.¹

OFFICE AND ROLE

Sumner insisted that the mores differentiate, as well as standardize, behavior, for status lies in them.² Status assigns individuals to various accepted social categories; each category has its own rights and duties. No individual becomes a moral person until he has a sense of his own station and the ways proper to it. Status, in its active and conscious aspect, is an elementary form of office. An office is a standardized group of duties and privileges devolving upon a person in certain defined situations.

In current writing on the development of personality, a great deal is made of social role. What is generally meant is that the individual gets some consistent conception of himself in relation to other people. This conception, although identified with one's self as a unique being, is a social product; Cooley would have said, a product of primary group life. But role, however individual and unique, does not remain free of status. Indeed, Linton says "a role is the dynamic aspect of a status."³ Role *is* dynamic, but it is also something more

¹ W. G. Sumner, *The Folkways*, pars. 40, 41, 56, 61, 63, 67, *et passim*; C. H. Cooley, *Social Organization*, chaps. iii, xxviii; E. Faris, "The Primary Group: Essence and Accident," *American Journal of Sociology*, XXXVIII (July, 1932), 41-50.

² *Op. cit.*, par. 73.

³ Ralph Linton, *The Study of Man*, chap. viii, "Status and Role."

than status. Status refers only to that part of one's role which has a standard definition in the mores or in law. A status is never peculiar to the individual; it is historic. The person, in status and in institutional office, is identified with a *historic role*. The peculiar role of a prophet or a political leader may be transformed into the historic role or office of priesthood or kingship. Every office has had a history, in which the informal and unique have become formal and somewhat impersonal. The story of an institution might well be told in terms of the growth of its offices, with which have been identified the personal roles of series of individuals.

Entrance into a status is not always a matter of choice. That does not prevent persons from being aware that they are entering it, from focusing their wills upon it, or from fulfilling the attendant obligations with consciously varying degrees of skill and scruple. Status gives self-consciousness and the conscience something to bite on.⁴

Every social order is, viewed in one way, a round of life. Anthropologists almost invariably describe it so, and show how persons of different status fit their activities into this round. But beyond routine, even in simple and stable societies, occur great ceremonial occasions and crucial enterprises. On such occasions some person or persons become the center of enhanced attention. Collective expression and effort are co-ordinated about them. Status may determine the selection of these persons, but they must perform special offices appropriate to the occasion. They become, within the limits of their offices, especially responsible for the fate of their fellows and for the integrity of their communities.⁵

⁴ B. Malinowski, in *Crime and Custom in Savage Society*, chap. v *et passim*, attacks the notion, so prominent in evolutionary social theory, that the member of a primitive society adheres to custom unconsciously and automatically. He maintains that among the Trobriand Islanders there is considerable margin between the maximum and minimum fulfilling of obligations and that, within these limits, persons are impelled by motives very like those recognized among us. Some men show an excess of zeal and generosity, banking upon a return in goods and prestige. He points also to a conflict of offices embodied in one person; a man is at once affectionate parent of his own children and guardian of the property and interests of his sister's children. Malinowski suggests that the man is often aware of this conflict.

⁵ See R. Redfield, *Chan Kom, a Maya Village*, pp. 153-59, for description of the *fiesta* and the office of *cargador*; B. Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, for the office of the chieftain in canoe-building and expeditions, and that of the magician in gardening.

The person who fills such a great office is judged not as the common run of mankind but with reference to his predecessors in office and to the popular conception of what the office should be. He is exposed to special demands. He is also protected, in so far as the office sets the limits of his responsibility, from both the bludgeons of critics and the sharp thrusts of his own conscience.

Objective differentiation of duty reaches its ultimate rigidity in ritual office. The subjective aspect of such rigidity is punctiliousness.⁶ The responsibilities of ritual office are so clear-cut as to allow the incumbent a feeling of assurance that he is doing his whole duty. The anxiety lest he fall short is but the greater.⁷ Anxiety and responsibility are alike focused upon the office, as something transcending the individual. The incumbent tends to be impatient of the criticisms of others. He wards them off by declaring that whoever criticizes him attacks the sacred office.

In the performance of ritual one may realize profoundly that he, even he, is playing a historic role; he may be transfigured in an ecstasy in which his personal attributes are merged with those of the office. Each meticulous gesture bursts with symbolic meaning. E. Boyd Barrett writes thus of his feeling while celebrating his first mass.

On the snow-white altar cloth before me lay a chalice of wine and on a paten a wafer of unleavened bread. Presently *at my words*, at my repetition of the eternal formula of consecration, the wine would become the blood of Christ, and the bread the body of Christ. My hands, soiled and sinful though they were, would be privileged to raise aloft in adoration the Son of God, the Saviour of the world. . . . Surely the words "Sanctus! Sanctus! Sanctus!" were none too sacred to pronounce in presence of this mystery of mysteries. . . . My first mass was an ecstasy of joy. . . . I gave myself confidently and wholeheartedly to God and I felt that He gave himself to me.⁸

⁶ Sumner, *op. cit.*, par. 67.

⁷ The psychoanalysts trace ritual to anxieties arising from unconscious guilt. In compulsion neurosis the individual ceaselessly performs rituals of *Buss* and *Nichtgeschehenmachen* (see A. Fenichel, *Hysterien und Zwangsneurosen*, chap. iv). J. Piaget, in *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, finds that young children play marbles as ritual before they play it as a game. In this early stage they observe punctiliously such rules as they know, attributing their origin to their fathers, the city alderman, and God. They are quick to accuse and facile at self-excuse, but show little regard for their fellow-players.

⁸ *Ex-Jesuit*, p. 124. Many Catholics expect special blessings from a priest's first mass.

While devotion and sense of office may be at their maximum in such moments, judgment is in abeyance. It is in the nature of ritual that it should be, since each action is part of a sacred whole. Furthermore, rituals are performed under compulsion often backed by a vow. A vow allows no turning back, no changing of the mind, no further exercise of judgment.⁹

An office may eventually become so ritualistic that the successive incumbents are but symbols rather than responsible agents. A rigid etiquette is observed in approaching them, and sentiments of reverence become so intense that the office is worshiped. This final point of impersonal institution of an office is reached at the cost of the more active functions of leadership. In ongoing collective life, contingencies arise to require decisions. Even a ritual may not go on without a stage-manager. Furthermore, every ritual is proper to an occasion. The occasion must be recognized and met. An office may become purely symbolic only if the meeting of contingencies is allocated to some other office.¹⁰

⁹ See W. G. Sumner, *War and Other Essays*, "Mores of the Present and Future," p. 157, in which he says: "One of the most noteworthy and far-reaching features in modern mores is the unwillingness to recognize a vow or to enforce a vow by any civil or ecclesiastical process. . . . In modern mores it is allowed that a man may change his mind as long as he lives." The belief that a man may change his mind is an essentially secular attitude. Catholic doctrine recognizes this, by distinguishing resolutions, promises, and vows. Vows are the most sacred, since they are promises to God. "A subsequent change in one's purpose is a want of respect to God; it is like taking away something that has been dedicated to Him, and committing sacrilege in the widest sense of the word." Resolutions are mere present intentions, without a commitment; promises between man and man or to the saints should be kept, but the breach is not so serious as that of a vow (*The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. XV, "Vows." It is perhaps the residue of the compulsion of a vow that gives ex-priests the sense of being marked men. See E. Boyd Barrett, *op. cit.* Ordinary life may be something of an anticlimax for these men once dedicated to holy office. Such men are also suspect. A French-Canadian recently dismissed all that a certain psychologist might say by remarking, "C'est un homme qui a porté la soutane."

There are many instances in sociological literature of the profound changes in an institution that accompany the decline of compulsion in its offices. Redfield, *op. cit.*, tells how in towns and cities the *fiesta* becomes something of a secular enterprise. No longer is it a sacred festival, led by a *cargador* who accepted "the holy burden" from his predecessor. The Webbs, in *English Local Government: the Parish and the County*, describe a similar decline of the sense of obligation to serve as parish officers in growing industrial towns.

¹⁰ Max Weber, in his "Politik als Beruf" (*Gesammelte politische Schriften*, pp. 396-450), essays a natural history of various types of political office. He shows how certain

Coming down to earth, the person cannot, apart from ritual, escape judgments. His peculiar social role asserts itself and may come into conflict with the office which he fills. The fusion of personal role and office is perhaps never complete save in ritual.

One of the extreme forms in which one's personal role appears is that of a call or peculiar mission. The person's conception of his mission may carry him beyond the conception which others have of his office. As an office becomes defined, there arise devices by which one's fellows decide whether one is the person fit to fill it. The first leader of a sect may be "called" to his task; his successors, too, are "called," but the validity of the call is decided by other men, as well as by himself.¹¹ Thus the "call," a subjective assurance and compulsion, is brought under the control of one's fellows. But the sense of mission may be so strong that it makes the person impatient of the discipline exercised by his colleagues.¹²

There are other ways in which personal role and office may conflict. It is sufficient for our present purposes to suggest that the very sense of personal role which leads one into an institutional office may make him chafe under its bonds. The economy of energy and will, devotion and judgment, peculiar to the individual does not completely disappear when he is clothed with an established, even a

offices, as that of sultan, became purely symbolic, while the wielding of political power and the risk of making mistakes were assumed by others. The position of the emperor of Japan is similar; the emperor is divine, but he speaks only through the voices of men. It is not suggested that these two features do not sometimes appear in the same office. They do, as in the papacy. Offices vary in their proportions of symbol and action.

¹¹ See the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. XV, "Vocation." While the Catholic church admits the possibility that divine light may be shed so abundantly upon a soul as to render deliberation about the validity of a vocation unnecessary in some cases, it does not regard such inner assurance necessary to vocation. The spiritual director is to discover and develop the germ of vocation by forming the character and encouraging "generosity of the will." The church insists that two wills should concur before one can enter the clergy: the will of the individual and the will of the church. The latter is "external vocation," which is "the admission of the candidate in due form by competent authority."

¹² The ardor of a person with a peculiar mission may become an insufferable reproach to his colleagues and contain a trace of insubordination to his superiors. The neophyte who is too *exalté* can be borne, but a certain relaxation of ardor is demanded in course of time. In a well-established institution, ardor must be kept within the limits demanded by authority and decorum; it may not necessarily reach the state in which "men, fearing to outdo their duty, leave it half done," as Goldsmith said of the English clergy.

holy, office. The more secular offices make fewer formal demands upon the individual; they require less suppression of the individuality. They are less symbolic and more subject to the test of effectiveness in action. A free, secular society, from this point of view, is one in which the individual may direct his energies toward new objects; one in which he may even succeed in creating a new office, as well as in changing the nature and functions of existing ones.

CAREER AND OFFICE

In any society there is an appropriate behavior of the child at each age. Normal development of personality involves passing in due time from one status to another. Some stages in this development are of long duration; others are brief. While some are thought of as essentially preparatory, and their length justified by some notion that the preparation for the next stage requires a set time, they are, nevertheless, conventional.

In a relatively stable state of society, the passage from one status to another is smooth and the experience of each generation is very like that of its predecessor. In such a state the expected rate of passage from one status to another and an accompanying scheme of training and selection of those who are to succeed to instituted offices determine the ambitions, efforts, and accomplishments of the individual. In a society where major changes are taking place, the sequence of generations in an office and that of offices in the life of the person are disturbed. A generation may be lost by disorder lasting only for the few years of passage through one phase.

However one's ambitions and accomplishments turn, they involve some sequence of relations to organized life. In a highly and rigidly structured society, a career consists, objectively, of a series of status and clearly defined offices. In a freer one, the individual has more latitude for creating his own position or choosing from a number of existing ones; he has also less certainty of achieving any given position. There are more adventurers and more failures; but unless complete disorder reigns, there will be typical sequences of position, achievement, responsibility, and even of adventure. The social order will set limits upon the individual's orientation of his life, both as to direction of effort and as to interpretation of its meaning.

Subjectively, a career is the moving perspective in which the

person sees his life as a whole and interprets the meaning of his various attributes, actions, and the things which happen to him. This perspective is not absolutely fixed either as to points of view, direction, or destination. In a rigid society the child may, indeed, get a fixed notion of his destined station. Even in our society he may adopt a line of achievement as his own to the point of becoming impervious to conflicting ambitions. Consistent lines of interest and tough conceptions of one's destined role may appear early in life.¹³

Whatever the importance of early signs of budding careers, they rarely remain unchanged by experience. The child's conception of the social order in which adults live and move is perhaps more naïve than are his conceptions of his own abilities and peculiar destiny. Both are revised in keeping with experience. In the interplay of his maturing personality and an enlarging world the individual must keep his orientation.

Careers in our society are thought of very much in terms of jobs, for these are the characteristic and crucial connections of the individual with the institutional structure. Jobs are not only the accepted evidence that one can "put himself over"; they also furnish the means whereby other things that are significant in life may be procured. But the career is by no means exhausted in a series of business and professional achievements. There are other points at which one's life touches the social order, other lines of social accomplishment—influence, responsibility, and recognition.

¹³ Psychoanalysts trace to very lowly motives the lines of consistency in the individual's conception of his life and the way in which he disciplines and marshals his efforts. Their more important point is that these phenomena rise out of intimate family relationships. They also use the term "mobility of the libido" (cf. Klein, "The Role of the School in the Libidinal Development of the Child," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, V [1924], 312-31) to indicate the child's capacity to transfer his affections and energies to objects in a larger world as he grows and extends his circle of activity. A great deal, however, remains to be done in the way of understanding the bearing of early experiences on the subsequent careers of persons. It is evident that the age, as well as the frequency, of appearance of a sense of career varies greatly from family to family and from class to class. The pressure on children to discipline themselves for careers likewise varies; the psychological by-products of these pressures want studying, for they seem sometimes to thwart the ends they seek.

See H. D. Lasswell, *World Politics and Personal Insecurity*, pp. 210-12, for a discussion of "career lines."

A woman may have a career in holding together a family or in raising it to a new position. Some people of quite modest occupational achievements have careers in patriotic, religious, and civic organizations. They may, indeed, budget their efforts toward some cherished office of this kind rather than toward advancement in their occupations. It is possible to have a career in an avocation as well as in a vocation.

Places of influence in our greater noncommercial organizations are, however, open mainly to those who have acquired prestige in some other field. The governors of universities are selected partly on the basis of their business successes. A recent analysis of the governing boards of settlement houses in New York City shows that they are made up of people with prestige in business and professional life, as well as some leisure and the ability to contribute something to the budget.¹⁴

It would be interesting to know just how significant these offices appear to the people who fill them; and further, to whom they regard themselves responsible for the discharge of their functions. Apart from that question, it is of importance that these offices are by-products of achievements of another kind. They are prerogatives and responsibilities acquired incidentally; it might even be said that they are exercised *ex officio* or *ex statu*.

The interlocking of the directorates of educational, charitable, and other philanthropic agencies is due perhaps not so much to a cabal as to the very fact that they are philanthropic. Philanthropy, as we know it, implies economic success; it comes late in a career. It may come only in the second generation of success. But when it does come, it is quite as much a matter of assuming certain prerogatives and responsibilities in the control of philanthropic institutions as of giving money. These prerogatives and responsibilities form part of the successful man's conception of himself and part of the world's expectation of him.¹⁵

Another line of career characteristic of our society and its institu-

¹⁴ Kennedy, Farra, and Associates, *Social Settlements in New York*, chap. xiv; T. Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America*, p. 72 *et passim*.

¹⁵ The Junior League frankly undertakes to train young women of leisure for their expected offices in philanthropic agencies.

tional organization is that which leads to the position of "executive." It is a feature of our society that a great many of its functions are carried out by corporate bodies. These bodies must seek the approval and support of the public, either through advertising or propaganda. Few institutions enjoy such prestige and endowments that they can forego continued reinterpretation of their meaning and value to the community. This brings with it the necessity of having some set of functionaries who will act as promoters and propagandists as well as administrators. Even such a traditional profession as medicine and such an established organization as the Roman Catholic church must have people of this sort. By whatever names they be called, their function is there and may be identified.

Sometimes, as in the case of executive secretaries of medical associations, these people are drawn from the ranks of the profession. In other cases they are drawn from outside. University presidents have often been drawn from the clergy. In the Y.M.C.A. the chief executive officer is quite often not drawn from the ranks of the "secretaries." But whether or not that be the case, the functions of these executive officers are such that they do not remain full colleagues of their professional associates. They are rather liaison officers between the technical staff, governing boards, and the contributing and clientele publics. Their technique is essentially a political one; it is much the same whether they act for a trade association, the Y.M.C.A., a hospital, a social agency, or a university. There is, indeed, a good deal of competition among institutions for men who have this technique, and some movement of them from one institution to another. They are also men of enthusiasm and imagination. The institution becomes to them something in which dreams may be realized.¹⁶

These enthusiastic men, skilled in a kind of politics necessary in a philanthropic, democratic society, often come to blows with the

¹⁶ The reports made by the American Association of University Professors on conflicts between professors and college presidents sometimes reveal in an interesting way the characteristics of both and of the offices they fill. See *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors*, XXI (March, 1935), 224-66, "The University of Pittsburgh"; XIX (November, 1933), 416-38, "Rollins College."

See also Bartlett, Hogan, and Boyd, *The Y.M.C.A. Executive Secretary*, for discussion of the activities, technique, and selection of these officers.

older hierarchical organization of the institutions with which they are connected. Therein lies their importance to the present theme. They change the balance of power between the various functioning parts of institutions. They change not only their own offices but those of others.

Studies of certain other types of careers would likewise throw light on the nature of our institutions—as, for instance, the road to political office by way of fraternal orders, labor unions, and patriotic societies. Such careers are enterprises and require a kind of mobility, perhaps even a certain opportunism, if the person is to achieve his ambitions. These ambitions themselves seem fluid, rather than fixed upon solid and neatly defined objectives. They are the opposites of bureaucratic careers, in which the steps to be taken for advancement are clearly and rigidly defined, as are the prerogatives of each office and its place in the official hierarchy.¹⁷ It may be that there is a tendency for our social structure to become rigid, and thus for the roads to various positions to be more clearly defined. Such a trend would make more fateful each turning-point in a personal career. It might also require individuals to cut their conceptions of themselves to neater, more conventional, and perhaps smaller patterns.

However that may be, a study of careers—of the moving perspective in which persons orient themselves with reference to the social order, and of the typical sequences and concatenations of office—may be expected to reveal the nature and “working constitution” of a society. **Institutions are but the forms in which the collective behavior and collective action of people go on.** In the course of a career the person finds his place within these forms, carries on his active life with reference to other people, and interprets the meaning of the one life he has to live.

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¹⁷ Mannheim would limit the term “career” to this type of thing. Career success, he says, can be conceived only as *Amtskarriere*. At each step in it one receives a neat package of prestige and power whose size is known in advance. Its keynote is security; the unforeseen is reduced to the vanishing-point (“Über das Wesen und die Bedeutung des wirtschaftlichen Erfolgstrebens,” *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, LXIII [1930], 458 ff.).