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ABSTRACT

A Marxian economic analysis of interpersonal communication within a capitalist system finds that capitalism, with its attendant stress on wholly economic values, produces a commodity-oriented society. Mass media advertising is the primary vehicle through which the capitalist culture indoctrinates the ideas of competition for the intangibles (love, freindship, etc.) as well as the tangible things of the culture. Thus intangibles become commodities. The counter-culture (flower children, purposive dropouts, etc.), community action groups (school liberation, free medical clinics, etc.), and women's liberation offer promise of improvement and rejection of society's consumer-oriented value system. (CH)

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AN ECONOMIC MODEL OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

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Finally, there came a time when everything that men had considered as inalienable became an object of exchange, of traffic and could be alienated. This is the time when the very things which till then had been communicated, but never exchanged; given, but never sold; acquired, but never bought--virtue, love, conviction, knowledge, conscience, etc.--when everything, in short, passed into commerce. It is the time of general corruption, of universal venality, or, to speak in terms of political economy, the time when everything, moral or physical, having become a marketable value, is brought to the market to be assessed at its truest value.¹

Isn't it comforting to know that Bank of America is always there to help us with the "business of living," that Exxon's river pilots are "highly trained products of the twentieth century," or that New York Metropolitan Life Insurance can give us the "goal--financial security" in this "game of life"? Perhaps, but with that comfort comes a tinge of dissatisfaction when we realize that economics has become the descriptive model for almost every situation. We "spend time," say "I won't buy that" to express disbelief, and describe someone who compromises himself as "selling out." The list could continue indefinitely, but the point is clear. Our economics have historically determined how we relate to each other.

In this era of sensitivity, encounter, and humanistic psychology teaching us to become more open and transparent, we find it increasingly difficult to integrate these concepts into our everyday lives. We "get-away," "retreat," have marathons, etc., where we can feel good about ourselves and each other; but when we come back "home" it's the same old thing. We must compete for that scarce commodity, love; and once we've

found it, we will never let it (or the person who embodies it) go. When we compete, we must compete for something, so love, security, friendship and all the other qualities of human relationships become commodities we can own. Like all good products, relationships are scarce, so we must hold onto them; and since love is scarce, we must not "give it away" to just anyone.

Historically, our economic imperative has been competitively based. Only the "fittest" survived in the economic world. It now appears that our economic model is swiftly becoming our interpersonal model. We find that when our cultural base is commodity-, competition-, and ownership-oriented, it becomes nearly impossible to accept people as people. This dialectical relationship between our culture (as economics) and ourselves alienates and destroys our humanness.

Erich Fromm writes:

Marx's main criticism of capitalism was precisely that it makes man a prisoner of material interests. . . . For him, man should become a being who is much, rather than one who has much.²

Marx's main point is that the economics of any society is the substructure which determines the nature of the other social relations in that society. The mode of production in any society is the primary determiner of the mode of interpersonal and social relations.

The mode of production of material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness.³

Marx saw that this is true in all societies; we can certainly attest that it is true in ours. The capitalist mode of production (as commodity

production) has become the form that characterizes our interpersonal relations. Meyer makes this point:

Not the system of exchange (commodity production), then, characterizes capitalism, but the fact that the social relations of production and all social relationships in general have turned into exchange relations.⁴

Capitalism has two bases: competition and ownership. The mode of production is based on producing commodities: the products are not intended for the consumption of the producer, but rather are objects which have utility value in the market place. Hence the commodities are competed for and owned. This is, of course, because the material goods necessary to sustain human life, are (or are thought to be) in short supply.

What happens, then, is that this mode of production, as a social relation, becomes the model after which we attempt to pattern our other social and interpersonal relationships. The result being:

The real relations, . . . speech, love, etc., . . . are thus not allowed to have their own significance but are depicted as the expression and representation of a third relation which underlies them, utility or exploitation.⁵

We make other people and ourselves as well into objects--commodities-- which can be exchanged in relation to their utility value. Since love, kindness, affection, friendship ("warm fuzzies"⁶) are all scarce, one must be very careful in giving (exchanging) these with another person. No one would want to get "short-changed." So we conserve these and the people with whom we exchange them. Just as we make ourselves into objects in the process of commodity production, so we also make ourselves into objects in the process of interpersonal relations. For example,

males have a certain kind of utility value--usually called "earning capacity"; females have another--usually called "nurturing capacity." These can be (unconsciously) exchanged if the proper agreement can be negotiated.

It is under capitalism that we find ourselves most alienated: cut-off from ourselves and others by objects of our own making. We have created a system of production in which machines take our place and a system of interpersonal relationships in which we have no authentic place aside from our saleable worth.

Political economy has indeed analysed, however incompletely, value and its magnitude, and has discovered what lies beneath these forms. But it has never once asked the question why this content takes these forms. . . .⁷

The forms of our social relationships are, in large measure, the determinants of their content. If the form is economic, then an economic content will follow. Hugh Duncan, a noted Burkean scholar, stated:

In social acts, form is content. We abstract form out of its context to study it, or, like the artist, to perfect it. But form is a constituent part of the context in which we act, and thus we cannot discuss content without at the same time discussing form.⁸

Kenneth Burke further contends that the profit motive creates an environment which fosters and encourages inauthenticity:

The profit motive is equally suspect under conditions of prosperity. By its emphasis on the competitive aspect of work as against the cooperative aspect of work, it runs counter to the very conditions by which man is made ethical--or social. It tends to leave man's capacities for "force and fraud" too purely capacities for force and fraud.⁹

Analyzed from a Marxian point of view, we find that the form or mode of production in a society determines the form of our relationships.

Burke and Duncan carry that analysis further with the interrelation of form and content in social situations. The influence of one upon the other cannot be overlooked. When our form is competitive (capitalistic), our content almost certainly is going to be commodity-oriented. To state it simply, when we compete, we live in a world of objects to be used rather than in a world of people as persons.

Advertising lures us with a world of satisfaction that can be ours if we only wear the right deodorant, drink the right soft drink, and have the right color hair. Advertisers would have us believe that with the purchase of these wonderful objects, all our problems will be solved. The way to have a better life and happier relationships can be found if we will only buy their product.

A speaker persuades an audience by the use of stylistic identifications; his act of persuasion may be for the purpose of causing the audience to identify itself with the speaker's interests. . . .¹⁰

Both the concepts of identification and mystification are tools of that all pervasive advertising tool of the producer: media. We not only identify with the characters portrayed; but we are also mystified by their uncanny grasp on the world: if only we could do the same! And we try so hard! We buy the products and expect results, but somehow we never get the results we expected; it never works as well as it does on television.

Advertising sells. Therefore it is a vital appendage of our economic structure. Each media's existence (whether it be television, radio, or print) absolutely depends on its ability to sell a wide variety of

commodities to its audience. Hence the media are intimately connected to and are actually active promoters of the economic model. Those with economic power are those with the media at their disposal.

The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.¹¹

One minute "free speech messages" simply cannot be expected to counteract hours of typical programming. The economic structure is selling happiness so pervasively that our very ideas of happiness are sold to us. Not only do the people on television appear happy but we know they are happy because that's what the media has taught us happiness is. Not only does the media call out psychological needs, it creates them. Through a linguistic and psychological bond, advertisers have created self-fulfilling prophecies in their consumers. For example, twenty years ago almost no one used underarm deodorants; today almost everyone uses underarm deodorants. We know that if we don't we will have body-odor, and people with body odor are failures. Our knowledge of this "fact" makes it true because we will now act toward a person with body-odor as though he is a failure. The prophecy is fulfilled: advertising has created a new need for us which only their product can (supposedly) fulfill. Thus, people who don't use deodorants are failures. A current example can be found in the "feminine hygiene deodorant" trend--note their use in five years. If the needs are not there, they are created for us.

With the identification or creation of needs comes the inevitable dissonance we must resolve. To resolve the dissonance we try to become more and more like the "folks in the shows" through buying what we see. We not only buy the product, but all the other commodities being sold in the ad as well (love, beauty, security, excitement, joy, satisfaction, youth, etc.). The spiral seems never ending. We buy commodities to fulfill needs, but then we always discover newly-created needs which we must attempt to satiate with more commodities. We try to make our relationships into commodities so that we can satisfy the needs we are told only commodities can satisfy. The commodity is our cultural imperative. It is the mode of interaction we understand. That is the way it has always been and it then is the only way we see. Perhaps it is time we looked to something new. Perhaps making relationships into commodities destroys them. We are never satisfied because we cannot buy meaning for our lives. We must create it.

Throughout our lives we "learn" from the media, but before and during our exposure to media we learn from others. These "others" create institutions (e.g., families and schools) to further expiate the learning process. Learning begins in the family and continues formally through the schools. But the learning which ensues is not merely the "content" we usually have in mind, it is learning the form of our interpersonal relations from parents and teachers. They are the models children learn to become.

A family is more than a group of people consisting of parents and their children. It is, for the child, the primary social mediating force

through which his culture and his class are brought to him. In learning his culture, the child learns the interpersonal and social models which are appropriate to him. Sartre writes:

[We discover] the point of insertion for a man and his class-- that is, the particular family--as a mediation between the universal class and the individual.¹²

In and from his family, the child learns not only the structure of his particular family, but most importantly, he learns the "social role which adults impose on him"¹³--he learns what he is to become.

The interpersonal model which is reflected in and through the family and which is learned by the child is the interpersonal model which is generally appropriate in his culture. The family is a microcosm of the culture. The structures we find in the family are reproduced throughout the entire society. Shulamith Firestone writes:

Marx was onto something more profound than he knew when he observed that the family contained within itself in embryo all the antagonisms that later develop on a wide scale within the society and the state.¹⁴

As the child learns a way of life in his family, he learns the way of life in his culture.

Children are uncanny observers. They perceive very quickly the bases of familial relationships. Parents are not just two people who live together; they "own" one another. The mother has bought security in a husband, and the father has bought nurturance in a wife. They each control and manipulate the other as utilitarian objects.

Love is scarce all over, and this is no more true than in the family. A husband feels compelled to compete with a newborn child for his wife's love.

The first child is slighted when the second child is born because the new baby takes all the mother's love. Children compete with each other and their parents for love. Parents compete with each other and their children. Everyone competes with everyone and in the ensuing struggle no one experiences good feelings. In this situation people are lost and alienation becomes predominant.

When we deal with each other as commodities, we don't deal with each other; we deal with commodities. Love is not loving; love is giving. Gift objects then are the measure of our love. The child who receives only two toys when her sister (!) receives three, knows who the parents love. At the risk of appearing silly, this example does have validity. In this culture parents (and other people as well) do express affection through material goods. In return, children are expected to increase the parents' social prowess through good grades, honors, and especially their future. Parents always want their children to have "the things they never had." They don't realize that in this culture their children will have to "pay a much greater price" for those things than they had to pay.

The emphasis on the economic model continues in the schools where "good work" is rewarded with "good grades." Like families, schools are also a microcosm of our social system supposedly teaching children to better deal in the "grown-up" world. As Jerry Farber puts it, "School is where you let the dying society put its trip on you."¹⁵ At school the child also learns the commodity-orientation in relation to himself and others.

In school, this is learned primarily from the teacher as a model. More than a purveyor of information, the teacher functions as an example for children. The teacher is the authority, and that authority is also a product of the commodity system.

And it's not what you're taught that does the harm but how you're taught. Our schools teach you by pushing you around, by stealing your will and your sense of power, by making timid square apathetic slaves out of you--authority addicts.¹⁶

Children must learn to believe and obey their teacher-authority just as they must believe and obey less obvious but probably more stringent authorities as adults. So what is learned is primarily obedience; almost everyone acknowledges that the "content" we try to teach is quickly forgotten--the "form" is all that's left. As Postman and Weingartner put it:

It is safe to say that just about the only learning which occurs in classrooms is that which is communicated by the structure of the classroom itself.¹⁷

The structure of the classroom is the same in every class, in every school. So it doesn't make much difference what the subject of the class is. "The real lesson is the method. The medium in school truly is the message. And the medium is, above all, coercive."¹⁸

The historical content children learn in school amply justifies the model they observe. History is composed of wars, great generals, and obedient soldiers; math thought problems depict buying and selling situations; writing must describe external events and things rather than express feelings; and physical education exists in athletic competition. Not only the form of education but the content as well teaches an economic model. Our product-oriented form demands a content congruent with its

goals; creating a product (a child) that is easily integrated into and contributes to the macrocosmic economic system.

Our situation is not optimistic. We have created an economic system which has in turn created us and determined our relationships in a never-ending cycle. Media and our well-meaning actions further this cycle by legitimizing the economic model. We are caught in and, at the same time, alienated from relationships that seem to have no meaning. We become "caught in" relationships because we "own" and "are owned"; but this "owning" alienates us from each other and from ourselves. There appears to be no viable way to escape; and if there is an escape, it is extremely difficult to discover and pursue.

Some sketchy, barely-formed alternatives to the economic model of interpersonal relations are emerging. Though their long-range effectiveness is still uncertain, they appear to have sufficient energy and viability to merit serious examination, analysis, and personal exploration and consideration.

Any alternative for change must include internal as well as external re-examination of our culture generally and of ourselves particularly. We can never create real alternatives until we have created real change in ourselves. We must "liberate" ourselves from our repressive, commodity-oriented needs to escape a commodity culture; and to liberate ourselves we must critically examine all that we have previously learned. We must then decide what we will and will not accept.

At this point begins the very difficult process of making these choices real in one's life: "deciding" is certainly part of "living"

but the intellectual decision must be followed by the even harder process of changing one's behavior everyday. An alternative, to be viable,

must present this possibility to us and perhaps even demand it of us. But an alternative must also clarify for us the cultural themes that make it necessary. Change is not only individual; it must be societal as well. We must recognize that societal imperatives have created us and will continue to create others until the culture changes. Hence, our concern must be with changing ourselves and changing the culture, so that the people within it and who grow up through it will no longer necessarily be so estranged from themselves and from others.

It is no wonder that change comes slowly; significant change demands from each of us the possible admission that the whole of our lives to this point has been worth little and even has been destructive of ourselves and others. That is a very difficult thing to do on any level other than the intellectual. But the importance is so great if we are to retrieve any of our lost humanity that we must be willing to take the risk. We must be willing to say, "I have been wrong all this time," so that we can begin the search for what is right for each of us.

Three social movements of the last decade appear to mirror the possibilities we have discussed. We intend to briefly examine these to discover the interpersonal model inherent in each and to evaluate each in terms of its feasibility as an alternative interpersonal model. We will begin with a consideration of the counter-culture, then we will turn to community-action groups especially with regard to education, and finally we will examine the women's liberation movement.

In the mid-sixties the flower children blossomed; and with them emerged a distinct counter-culture. The whole basis of this culture was the denial of that very object we had so long cherished: the commodity. It was a "people-oriented" culture where cooperation became more important than competition--where objects became secondary to people. Slater analyzed this "new culture" in relation to what he calls the "old culture" as characterized by the rejection of the assumption of scarcity. He writes:

The core of the old culture is scarcity. Everything in it rests upon the assumption that the world does not contain the wherewithal to satisfy the needs of its human inhabitants. From this it follows that people must compete for these scarce resources. . . .

The new culture is based on the assumption that important human needs are easily satisfied and that the resources for doing so are plentiful.¹⁹

The material goods necessary to sustain life were no longer considered to be in short supply and hence no longer needed to be competed for and hoarded. Cooperation and sharing then become the dominant themes in this culture's economic life. The interpersonal model is parallel. Since it is no longer assumed that there is not enough love, affection, etc., to go around, these do not need to be hoarded either. If one can feel affectionate toward and receive affection from more than one person, there is no longer a need for interpersonal relationships based on mutual interpersonal ownership.

Community then became the dominant theme in the interpersonal relations of the counter-culture and communal living the life-style extension of this theme. It is in communal living that the principles of the counter-culture find their best expression. This living situation best allows for the diffusion of interpersonal ownership throughout the

community--with regard both to children and to spouses. Since there are more people with whom one is intimately in direct, regular, and continued contact, the necessity to compete for a scarce "commodity" (affection) is greatly reduced. Affection then has a chance to flourish replacing the commodity fetish of the old culture.

Although communal living has obviously had its downfalls, the concept is still sound. Forging new ways of life out of the old is an extremely difficult task, and all the more so when we have learned the old so well. It is difficult not to be jealous, not to hoard, not to crave commodities, etc.

One of the commodities that has plagued communes is drugs. If communal living is based on common drug needs, it is bound to fail, because the need for the drug always supercedes everything else. It is sad that many counter-culture people are dependent on drugs, when their first encounters with drugs helped them see alternatives to their situations. The drug escape fostered new ways of "looking at" our environment and with those new views came alternative ways of life.

Although the counter-culture was great for the middle-class, it is not a possibility for the poor. The poor suffer not from too many commodities but from an obvious lack of them. However, it is precisely the commodity-culture of the middle and upper classes which has created the poverty experienced by the poor. The poor are a commodity-culture's most direct and obvious victims.

In its appeal to the middle class, the media unwittingly helped spurn the poor to action. The luxuries advertised on television were

not to be had if a person lived on a meager income. It didn't take long after the general dissemination of television for the poor to realize that they were the victims of the structure, and that to stop the victimage they had to disassociate themselves from that structure.

If rejection of victimage is to have meaning, it must be accompanied by an inner-dependence within the community to take the place of dependence on the macrocosmic scheme. As trite as it may seem, power does lie in numbers; and both power and numbers can be found in an organized community. Economic boycotts, free medical and legal clinics, community-owned stores and gasoline stations and especially community free schools are quickly becoming effective alternative modes of dealing with the commodity-culture.

When public schools are amply provided, it seems at a cursory glance that a community school is hardly necessary. But the public school as a service to the poor does not hold under analysis. The dregs of the educational system can always be found in the ghetto: substandard facilities and teaching are the rule, and the general orientation of the structure works to maintain the status of the poor. Schools are intimately involved in propagating the economic model. This has become increasingly evident in the move away from "liberal education" in favor of "professional and career preparation."

The economics of our competitive society depends on the poor.* In any competitive enterprize there must be losers; and in our culture,

*Government economists tell us that a three to five percent unemployment rate is necessary for a "growth economy." They don't tell us what this means in terms of human lives nor its implications regarding the class structure in this country.

schools help create the losers in the poor. To send one's children to these schools is to perpetuate your victimage. To break this cycle, the victimized community must educate its own children.

"Free schools" have generally been thought of as "fluffy escapes to the forest" where middle and upper class liberal parents could send their children. The free school concept, as we intend it, is not this at all. It arises in and from a concerned community. As Jonathan Kozol says:

In my belief, an isolated upper-class Free School for the children of the white and rich within a land like the United States and in a time of torment such as 1972 is a great deal too much like a sandbox for the children of the S.S. guards at Auschwitz.²⁰

The kind of community concern which leads to the development of alternative educational structures also entails an alternative interpersonal model. The model is based on "community": mutual cooperation and involvement working toward independence from the tyranny of the commodity through mutual inner-dependence within the community. The community-action organization is very non-alienation oriented. It directly involves individuals in their community and their futures and actually gives them some real and meaningful control over their lives.

This sense of community is an important experience in a person's life. Unfortunately, in the United States it is almost totally missing. Those who miss "community" most are females. Males, for the most part, work outside the home and have work and social groups which help to meet these needs. Women are not allowed this. They are taught not to enjoy each other but to compete against each other for the "best catch." When the catch is made, they live isolated, separate, and alone--each in her own suburban home. Because of this, women's liberation may well

be the most important and pervasive alternative we have considered.

Being a comparatively recent movement, women's liberation must be considered in a slightly different light than the others we have discussed. Our consideration must be done mostly in terms of possibilities--what might or could develop from this movement--rather than in terms of what has developed. So far there are almost no women's cooperative organizations and very few marriages have been based on its principles. Hence, it is difficult to discover an interpersonal model in the movement except by considering what the movement stands for, especially as articulated in its best literature.

Traditionally, females have been of great use to males. They have cared for their homes, fed and clothed them, borne and raised their children, etc. In short, women have been nice commodities to have around. Further, women (having essentially no other alternative) have internalized this orientation and have come to believe they are commodities--they even try to become good ones. There is no other group of people so concerned with their appearance: their clothes, their hair, their figure, their face, their weight, are all extremely important parts of the commodity and must be made to appear as perfect as possible. And all this is for men. Women enjoy "pleasing their man" because their very existence is defined for them, by and in relation to men.

Women's liberation means for each woman involved the end of her commodity existence. No longer being a commodity-for-herself or a commodity-for-others, the necessity to have competitive relations with other women and to have utility relations with men is ended. Once women look

at themselves differently, all their relationships with others will and must change. Further, it will also mean the end of commodity relations between parents and children. Young people, like women, freed from their commodity orientation to themselves and others can begin to be people in their own right.

Thus, women's liberation means liberation for all in terms of the possibilities for changing the traditional sex-based roles. The alternatives for both men and women (and children as well) will be much broader; each person can and must choose what he or she likes and wants for him or her self. This does not mean that women will have more opportunities for working and that men will do a few household chores. It means that each person can and must create his or her own life style.

Since the "proper" roles for men and women will no longer be a priori assumptions, the relationship between a man and a woman will have to be invented by them. This necessarily entails some facility at "meta-communicating"--talking about their relationship. With the traditional guidelines gone, we must have both the ability and the willingness to cooperatively create unique relationships.

If women's liberation demands that we create new relationships between ourselves, it also insists that children be treated differently. The process of childrearing whose function is "socialization"--teaching a child the ways of life of his culture--must be oriented not so much toward teaching the way of life, but more toward creating an individual who can adapt in a rapidly changing world and who can, without undue frustration, create and sustain satisfying relationships. Since a child

will no longer have the highly restricted sex-based future most of us have had, he or she must learn how to create roles and relationships which will be personally satisfying. As parents' relationships change, they must present to the child a model of successful interpersonal invention. The child will be presented a model of intra- and interpersonal change and hence he or she will learn not the "proper roles" but rather the importance and skills of interpersonal invention.

With liberation and changing roles, new social structures are bound to emerge, and in fact, must emerge if women's liberation is to be anything more than a passing fad. As women become aware of themselves, other women, and the roles they encompass, they can stop destructively competing with one another and begin cooperating. The institution of community day care centers serves as an example of that beginning. The general trend day care centers exemplify must be expanded to create an even more cooperative community. The isolation and alienation of the housewife, especially, can be ameliorated by neighborhood co-ops for general household chores. As Germaine Greer notes:

Part of the aim of these cooperative enterprises is to break down the isolation of the single family and of the single parent, but principally I am considering ways to short-circuit the function of women as chief fall-guys for advertising, chief spenders of the nation's loot.²¹

When women can stop functioning as competing commodities and begin functioning as cooperative persons they can reject their commodity needs and buy rationally rather than impulsively and for status.

Equal pay for equal work has already, through considerable pressure, become a foreseeable goal. But if that's all that changes, women's

liberation will have failed. Women and men must work together to radically restructure their cultural imperative so that they are no longer forced to relate to themselves and others as commodities.

Women who adopt the attitudes of war in their search for liberation condemn themselves to acting out the last perversion of dehumanized manhood. . . .²²

Women cannot become equal commodities to better compete with men and still preserve any humanity. We must end the commodity relationship altogether. If any of us are to survive as human, we must find and foster humanity in each other.

We have considered numerous possibilities for concluding this paper: from summaries to calls-to-action. But summaries are a bit mundane and calls-to-action almost missionary, so at the risk of both this conclusion will attempt to be "realistic."

Anything we can do individually or collectively to divorce ourselves from the economic model of the commodity culture is a step forward. These attempts can include anything from analyzing television advertisements to communal living. We each must do what is appropriate and possible for us at this time. For some this may mean analyzing television advertisements; for others communal living (to name only two of a myriad of possibilities). Whatever the possibilities, they must entail our cooperation with one another, if we are to create anything out of our awareness. The very least we can do is refrain from criticizing those who are making attempts, no matter how "silly" they may appear.

Let's face it. We know that significant societal/cultural change is a long way off. But we can't allow our knowledge of that to deny

personal change. Each of us can and must create alternative microcosms of our own so we can live and relate to others not as object to object, but as "person to person."²³

FOOTNOTES

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⁸Hugh Duncan, Communication and Social Order, Oxford University, NY, 1962, p. 320.

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