GEORGE C. HOMANS

HISTORY, THEORY, AND METHOD

Edited by A. Javier Treviño

Foreword by Charles Tilly

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Foreword
Homage to Homans

Charles Tilly

What a vivid pleasure to recall George Caspar Homans! My first memory of him runs back almost sixty years. George stood, ramrod straight, before an undergraduate class in Harvard's Emerson Hall. With zest, he told us youngsters about the Bank Wiring Observation Room, the Norton Street Gang, the family in Tikopia, Hilltown, the Electrical Equipment Company, and human social life at large. Unlike his fellow teachers, Pitirim A. Sorokin and Talcott Parsons, Homans spoke to undergraduates with radio announcer articulation and force, daring his listeners to doubt what he said. His Boston Brahmin accent reinforced the sense that any challenge had better be clear, sensible, and brief. Yet we knew that he would listen, think, and reply cogently.

At that stage (already past *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* and en route to *The Human Group*, which packaged, between hard covers, the undergraduate lectures we heard), George presented himself to undergraduates as a hardheaded empiricist, impatient with fluffy concepts and unverifiable explanations. Only later, as he was working toward *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms*, did he begin to distinguish between the empirical generalizations that preoccupied him in *The Human Group* and the explanations he hoped to deduce from more general propositions about, yes, human social behavior.

Many authors in this book analyze what George meant by that distinction and how well he deployed it. Their perceptive work frees me from having to describe, explain, and criticize what he was doing. Still, it is worth noticing to what a large extent George undertook his later writing as an effort to cleanse sociology's Augean Stables of their accumulated dross. As the introduction to *Social Behavior*, explicitly footnoting his "colleague and friend Talcott Parsons," put the point:

> Much modern sociological theory seems to me to possess every virtue except that of explaining anything. Part of the trouble is that much of it consists of systems of categories, or pigeonholes, into which the theorist fits different aspects of social behavior. No science can proceed without its system of categories, or conceptual scheme, but this in itself is not enough to give it explanatory power. A conceptual scheme is not a theory. The science also needs a set of general propositions about the relations between the categories, for without such propositions explanation is impossible. No explanation without propositions! But much modern sociological theory seems quite satisfied with itself when it has

> set up its conceptual scheme. The theorist shoves different aspects of behavior into his pigeonholes, cries "Ah-ha!" and stops. He has written the dictionary of a language that has no sentences. He would have done better to start with the sentences. (Homans 1961: 10–11)

The passage combines exasperation with missionary zeal.

Yet it also conveys a false impression of a true believer. It took me years as George's student and then as his colleague to recognize two features of his bombastic intellectual style. First, he actually welcomed challenges. He enjoyed arguing more than sermonizing, esteemed serious opponents, and refused simply to tuck an objection into some unused corner of his analytical scheme. Second, for all his stridency, he despised sham, including any possibility of sham in his self-presentation.

One personal story sticks in my mind. In May 1976, George's Harvard colleagues organized a day of talking and feasting to celebrate his retirement. They recruited me as one of the outside speakers. My talk intertwined an appreciation of George's historical work with takes from his poetry and several references to his favorite painter J.M.W. Turner. Years before, George had explained to me that Turner had invented impressionism long before any French painters thought of it. An impressive Turner hung in his dining room.

Shortly after my talk, as it happened, George and I were seated side by side at lunch. He turned to me and said, "Charlie, I noticed that you talked about Turner." I pointed out that he had told me about his admiration for Turner's work, and that no one could forget the Turner he had in his house. "Charlie," he roared with delight, "It's a fake!" He explained what had happened. His sister had received the alleged Turner as part payment of a debt due her by an art dealer, then had given it to George, who hung it on his wall. A few years before the retirement ceremony (as fallible memory recalls it), the sister had visited the Turner collection at London's Tate, boasted of the family Turner, and intrigued the Tate curator. When the curator next came to Boston, he visited George's house, inspected the painting carefully, and pronounced it a very good copy.

"So what do you have up there now?" I naively asked George. "It's still there," answered George, laughing. "We liked it before, and we still like it." That was George, confident enough in his own lineage, talent, and accomplishments that he had no use for sham.

Readers of this book will soon learn that for all the subsequent work challenging, refining, and extending George Homans's intellectual contributions, his original writings still deserve attention today. They deserve attention for their energy, clarity, and spirit of adventure. Perhaps what sociologists now call exchange theory will stand as his most durable heritage. Perhaps others will recognize that, contrary to his reputation as a radical psychological reductionist, from early on George located his crucial causes and effects of social behavior in interpersonal transactions rather than individual minds. Perhaps his analyses will come into their own again now that behavioral economics and a wide variety of relational analyses are flourishing as alternatives to the rational choice founda-

tions George self-consciously rejected when it came to microfoundations for social science.

Whatever happens to these aspects of George Homans's scholarly reputation, let's not forget the zest.

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Introduction
The Sentiments and Activities of George C. Homans

A. Javier Treviño

My great interest and pleasure in life is bringing order out of chaos.
—George C. Homans (1968: 2)

Let us not be mice and understand; let us be men and explain*!*
—George C. Homans (as cited in Roethlisberger 1977: 384)

Let us get men back in, and let us put some blood in them.
—George C. Homans (1964: 816)

Not long ago, going back a generation or two, the major writings of George C. Homans—particularly *The Human Group* (1950) and *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms* (1961, 1974)—were required reading for scores of students interested in sociological theory. Today, with the exception of his seminal paper, "Social Behavior as Exchange" (1958), which is typically reprinted in anthologies of sociological theory, Homans's contributions have been largely forgotten; or, if not exactly forgotten then at least relegated to, and subordinated by, the obscurity of obligatory footnoting. However that may be, several of the currently popular trends and issues of sociological theory—namely, structural exchange theory, rational choice theory, network exchange theory, distributive justice, and metatheoretical considerations of deductive reductionism—have their roots in Homans's work. His ideas, to be sure, had a profound influence, positively or negatively, on the thinking of major sociologists like Richard M. Emerson, Peter M. Blau, and James S. Coleman. Additionally, Homans has also impacted the research of scholars such as Linda D. Molm, Karen S. Cook, and Edward J. Lawler who are currently working in the social exchange tradition (see this volume). Moreover, Homans's famous plea for, as the title of his important article has it, "Bringing Men Back In" (1964a), led sociology away from an overly abstract focus on society and toward the earnest consideration of human activity, be that in the form of symbolic interactionism, Goffmanian sociology, ethnomethodology, or economic sociology (sociological forms Homans did

not and would not endorse, but which nevertheless have a "micro" focus of analysis). Indeed, there was a time when what George Homans said and wrote mattered.

It has been a generation since the appearance of the first and only *Festschrift* honoring Homans's work, *Behavioral Theory in Sociology* (1977),[1] and I believe it is now time for a reassessment of that work—not for the purpose of hero worship or, at the other extreme, to set Homans up as a straw man or whipping boy—for such strategies serve little purpose in the advancement of sociological theory. Rather, Homans's oeuvre must be revisited in order to learn from his successes and mistakes. As such, the purpose of this book is to carefully reexamine Homans's ideas and determine how they inform social thinking—theory and method—today.

This volume consists of this lengthy Introduction that will serve to acquaint a new generation of scholars with one of the most important social thinkers of the twentieth century. It is followed by twelve essays, prepared especially for this collection, and written by several prominent sociologists, an anthropologist, a historian, and a poet—together the essays cover the wide range of Homans's intellectual interests throughout his long and illustrious career. We begin with a brief overview of his life and work.

GEORGE C. HOMANS: HIS LIFE AND WORK

George C. Homans—historian, anthropologist, sociologist, poet—held no graduate degrees in any subject. Yet, he was an accomplished medievalist who published numerous academic articles and an enduring monograph on social life in England during the Middle Ages. He wrote extensively, if sporadically, on social anthropology in general, and kinship networks in particular. Homans taught sociology at Harvard, where he spent most of his career; he served as the chairman of the sociology department there, was elected president of the American Sociological Association, and was a founding father of a major sociological paradigm: social exchange theory. In addition, two of his many books, *The Human Group* and *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms*, became immediate international successes. He also made significant empirical and conceptual contributions to various substantive areas in sociology, namely, small-group research, industrial sociology, distributive justice, and metatheory. Less well known is that Homans fancied himself a poet, wrote poetry throughout most of his life, and near the end of it published his collection of "poems of a lifetime."

Biography

The eldest child of Robert and Abigail (née Adams) Homans, George Casper Homans was born on August 11, 1910, in the prosperous Back Bay district of Boston.[2] On his mother's side, he was sixth generation in the lineage of that distinguished family, the Adamses of American statesmanship and literature, which

includes John Adams, second president of the United States, and his wife Abigail (after whom Homans's mother was named). On his father's side, the Homanses were well known for a number of prominent physicians, including some who were professors at Harvard Medical School. Indeed, all Homans's male ancestors had studied at Harvard since 1768. His father, Robert, who was an attorney, not a doctor, graduated from Harvard Law School and later served as a member of the influential Harvard Corporation.

These ancestors of George Homans were Boston Brahmins, New England Yankees, WASPs. And his was a blue-blood inheritance of a bygone era that never left him, and that thoroughly permeated all his sentiments and activities. In partial explanation of this privileged, Olympian pedigree, Homans, in his late-in-life autobiography, *Coming to My Senses*, writes: "What the Brahmins of my generation escaped, unlike some of their descendants today, was a feeling of guilt about belonging to an upper class. I myself was not conscious that my ancestors had exploited anyone" (1984: 9).

Given his aristocratic upbringing and family legacy, it was inevitable that Homans be destined for Harvard, which he entered, as a major in English literature, in 1928. During his undergraduate years there were at least three singular experiences that later influenced his distinctive approach to history and the social sciences. First, as a requirement of his major Homans had to learn Old English. His facility with Old English, along with the Latin he had mastered in prep school, would prove to be invaluable to him as a historian of medieval England, particularly one interested in the etymology of words and their social expression. Second, he took a course in elementary astronomy that introduced him to the positivistic approach of scientific development and explanation. This was an approach that indelibly shaped his notions of sociological theory—what it should be, what it should look like, and what it should do. Finally, the keen snobbery evocative of Harvard's elitist environment taught Homans much about people's face-to-face interactions. This is perhaps the reason he never tired of examining social status.[3] These and other persuasions served to eventually make George Homans, at least for a time, a prominent intellectual on the world stage of sociology.[4]

But even though his intellectual reach was truly global, Homans's seat of influence would always be local: he spent his entire academic life at Harvard University, not five miles distance from where he was born. And it was Harvard—in the guise of Pitirim A. Sorokin, the chairman of the Sociology Department at the time—that gave Homans his first appointment as faculty instructor in Sociology in 1939. That instructorship was, in fact, a vacancy that had opened when Robert K. Merton left Harvard to take an appointment at Tulane. In 1939, aside from Sorokin and his close friend and former colleague from the University of Minnesota, Carle C. Zimmerman, the Department of Sociology also consisted of the newly promoted associate professor, Talcott Parsons, who had written his first major opus a couple of years before, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937). By the time of his appointment Homans himself had already published his coauthored text, *An Introduction to Pareto* (1934), and by the end of

his instructorship, had produced his second book, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (1941a). Homans's intellectual position toward Parsons would eventually be marked by animosity and confrontation—and it would last their entire lives.

Shortly after the release of *English Villagers*, Homans was called to active duty, in May 1941, to serve as a line officer in the U.S. Naval Reserve. Out of four and a half years in the Navy during World War II, Homans spent more than two years in command of small ships engaged in antisubmarine warfare and the escort of convoy operations. His stint in the service, however, was not devoid of sociology's influence. Indeed, Homans explicitly credits sociology for his successes as a naval officer: "I myself learned much from sociology which made me a more effective sea captain than I should otherwise have been" (Homans 1946: 294). Not only did sociology prepare Homans, beforehand, for his duties as a naval officer in "handling men effectively," sociology and sociological issues occupied his mind during and immediately after the war.

There are two contributions that Homans made to sociology that are explicitly connected with his experiences in the Navy. Not long after the war ended, Homans's active service also came to an end. By that time he had served on three ships, including the U.S.S. *Accentor*, a ninety-seven-foot wooden minesweeper, of which he was commanding officer, and had achieved the rank of Lieutenant Commander. Between November 18, 1945, when he resigned from the Navy, and December of that year, Homans sailed aboard a transport, traveling from North China to San Diego. On that voyage he sketched out what he had learned about the social problems of command in small warships. This resulted in the article "The Small Warship," which was published in the *American Sociological Review* in 1946.

Homans's other and more significant war-time sociological contribution was the preliminary construction of a paradigm—a conceptual scheme—for the study of social organization, a methodological issue that had occupied his attention since the late 1930s when he was a member of the prestigious Harvard Society of Fellows. The first printed version of it had appeared in the last chapter of *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*. His attempt to further refine the scheme was interrupted when Homans joined the Navy in 1941. The first couple of years, during his lonely watches of the night at sea, he was unconsciously at work on elaborating it. Consciously, Homans did not take up the project again until his ship was laid up for repairs at the naval base in Willemstad, Curaçao, during the spring of 1943. Then in two weeks time he revised the entire scheme and wrote it out in the form of a sketch, henceforth referring to it was the "Willemstad sketch" (Homans 1984: 315–16). After the war, he published a revision of the Willemstad sketch and later introduced it in *The Human Group* in order to show how it could be applied to the familiar features of small groups.

At war's end, in 1946, Homans was re-employed by Harvard, this time as Associate Professor of Sociology in the newly created Department of Social Relations. The department, among whose chief architects were Talcott Parsons, Gordon Allport, Henry A. Murray, and Clyde Kluckhohn, was an amalgam of

three disciplines: social and personality psychology, social anthropology, and sociology. It was created in order to examine the relations between personality, culture, and society (considered the "softer" sides of the social sciences) and to develop a grand theory—later to be called the general theory of action—that would link all three.

Two tenured professorships were assigned to the new department. One went to Samuel A. Stouffer, the distinguished statistician, who, during the war, had conducted various psychological and sociological studies in the military that later resulted in the landmark two-volume opus, *The American Soldier* (1949). The other professorship went to George Homans, no doubt on the strength of his two published books, *Introduction to Pareto* and *English Villagers*.[5] And it was Homans's good fortune to be in an interdisciplinary department that put him in touch with younger scholars such as the social anthropologist David M. Schneider, with whom he later coauthored the book *Marriage, Authority, and Final Causes* (1955), as well as with the psychologist B.F. Skinner, whom Homans had known since the mid-1930s when they were both members of the Society of Fellows, and whose behavioral psychology would be of greatest influence to him in the development of his social exchange theory. Moreover, upon his return to Harvard, Homans renewed his friendship with Fritz J. Roethlisberger of the "human relations group" at the business school and with whom he would later carry out a research project (together with Roethlisberger's junior partners Abraham Zaleznick and C. Roland Christensen), *The Motivation, Productivity, and Satisfaction of Workers* (1958).

The Department of Social Relations lasted until 1970 when the revived Department of Sociology came into existence, with Homans as chairman. By that time Homans had held visiting professorships at three major English universities (Manchester, Cambridge, and Kent), served as president of the American Sociological Association (1963–64), and published the first edition of his seminal *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms* (1961). He retired from Harvard in 1976, having spent most of his life there.

By all accounts, including his own, George Homans's main personality trait was frankness, or perhaps less delicate—tactlessness. Homans's friend from the Harvard Business School, Fritz Roethlisberger, commented on it: "George in his personal style was forthright and direct. No one had any question where he stood; he never seemed to care upon whose sensitive toes he trod" (1977: 243). Near the end of his life Homans seemed to imply that his forthrightness stemmed from a lack of good manners: "Good manners still do not come naturally to me," he writes. "I have to think about them, and often I do not think quickly enough" (1984: 38). Self-assuredness may also account for his bluntness, both in speech and in writing: "[W]henever people have brought up topics I thought I knew something about—and such topics have been many—I have never hesitated to correct their mistakes promptly and decisively, a trait not calculated to endear me to my interlocutors" (Homans 1984: 66).

Doubtless, Homans's directness, confidence, and boisterousness (he had a "booming" resonant voice) can be attributed, at least in part, to his aristocratic

bearing. And it is this aristocratic bearing that also contributed to what his former student, Charles Tilly, refers to as "George's joyful snobbery" (1990: 265). And a snob he was, if only in self-defense: "I myself do not hold a doctorate," Homans writes in *Coming to My Senses*, "and I have from that fact indulged myself in much inverted snobbery" (1984: 120). Yet, despite his hauteur, Homans seldom lacked civility toward others. Daniel Bell states that Homans, "treated every student and colleague (with an occasional lapse toward Parsons) with simple respect, regardless or age, sex, social status or previous servitude" (1992: 592).

William F. Whyte found Homans hard to like in their younger days, during the mid- to late-1930s when they were both junior fellows in the Society of Fellows. Whyte describes the Monday-evening dinners with the senior fellows as following a regular pattern, with the young Homans at center stage: "For the junior fellows, the action began with the tossing of salad in the pantry. George C. Homans and his special friends were in charge of this ritual and acted as if special expertise and occult knowledge were required" (Whyte 1994: 54–55). At that time Homans seemed to have had no interest in Whyte's slum district study, which became the classic ethnography *Street Corner Society* (1943). Later, when Homans used much of the material in Whyte's book in writing *The Human Group*, the tension between them diminished. Writes Whyte: "I like to think that our friendly relations in later years were not due simply to his belated interest in my work but that the navy had a humanizing influence on George Homans" (1994: 61).

In the final analysis it is perhaps Tilly's (1990) moving memoir of his former sociology professor that best connects Homans's temperament and talents with his intellectual legacy. Tilly credits Homans with attracting many bright students into sociology shortly after World War II as a result of hearing him lecture concretely, forcefully, and with elegant simplicity. These students, he explains, could not have escaped Homans's lectures without thinking that right principles are always simple principles, that profusion of concepts cripples effective theory. Tilly maintains that Homans's students inherited his distrust of theory for its own sake and theories about theories. Finally, "[e]ven when they disagreed, his students and readers came away stimulated and refreshed. George was a vivifier, a life-giver" (Tilly 1990: 264).

During his long career Homans produced five autobiographical accounts (1962: 1–49, 1968, 1983, 1984, 1986a)—perhaps more than any other sociologist. But it is in the first of these that he gives the most succinct and candid depiction of his life and work:

> Given the chance, I have always deserted anything that had contemporary practical importance or that might lead to reforms. I have deserted the twentieth century for the thirteenth, social pathology for primitive kinship, industrial sociology for the study of small groups. It may have been mere escapism: my nerves may have been too weak for the modern world. More likely I was reluctant to change a world that, on the whole, was behaving so well toward me. But I have found a description of the syndrome that is more flattering to me and

> that may well be true. I have come to think now—I did not see it then—that what never failed to interest me was not sociology as an agency of change or as a means of understanding my immediate environment but sociology as a generalizing science. What were the best possibilities for establishing generalizations? What were the main intellectual issues? What was the subject really about? By what handle should we lay hold of it? (Homans 1962: 9)

George C. Homans died on May 29, 1989, at the age of seventy-eight. Among those of his many friends and colleagues who spoke at his Harvard memorial service were Daniel Bell, Charles Tilly, Ezra Vogel, and David Riesman.

Intellectual Influences

The majority of Homans's intellectual influences, whether in the form of people or events, came to him relatively early in life—during his undergraduate years. The first of these were his mentors: the historian and essayist Bernard DeVoto, the physiologist *cum* sociologist Lawrence J. Henderson, and the psychologist Elton Mayo.

As a major in English literature, Homans was assigned to Bernard "Benny" DeVoto as a tutee, beginning in his sophomore year at Harvard. For the next three years Homans met with DeVoto once a week, alone, for an hour, to discuss his assigned readings. Homans always maintained that DeVoto was "the person who made the biggest single difference to my intellectual life" (1984: 85), for two main reasons. First, DeVoto introduced Homans to Vilfredo Pareto's *Traité de sociologie générale*, "which was ultimately to bring me into sociology" (Homans 1984: 87). Second and more importantly, DeVoto introduced Homans to Professor of Biological Chemistry and apologist for the work of Pareto, Lawrence J. Henderson.

Henderson first made a name for himself through his work on the chemical equilibrium of the blood, which made possible the development of blood plasma. In 1927, Wallace B. Donham, the dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, induced Henderson to head the School's "fatigue laboratory." The purpose of the Laboratory was to examine empirically, and from the physiological point of view, what actually happened to people at work. It wasn't before long, however, that Henderson became less interested in the physiology of work and increasingly fascinated with the human problems of work—the behavior of industrial workers—which meant turning to the study of sociology.

In 1926, one year before Henderson's appointment to the Laboratory, his friend and colleague, the distinguished Harvard entomologist William Morton Wheeler, whose work on insect societies had led him to read all the sociology, human or animal, he could put his hands on, suggested to Henderson that he read Pareto's *Traité*.[6] Henderson took to Pareto right away. As historian and fellow Paretian, Crane Brinton, explains, "It was this conversion to Pareto that made [Henderson] in his last years, to the regret of many of his more conventional colleagues in the natural sciences, a sociologist" (1958: 209). Henderson

told his former student DeVoto (as he did almost everyone else he met) to read the *Traité*, and DeVoto urged it on Homans, who finished reading it by July 1930. "At that time," Homans comments, "I probably knew more about Pareto's sociology than any other person at Harvard and perhaps the United States except Wheeler, Henderson, and possibly Charlie Curtis. Yet I had no other sociology and had no suspicion that I was to become a sociologist" (1984: 104).

Aside from Pareto's sociology, Henderson also impressed upon Homans the doctrine of the *first approximation*. Henderson believed that in making theoretical statements (propositions), the most that anyone can accomplish "is to find a very rough description of a few uniformities; a description that must be at best far from accurate; a description that is only one of many possible descriptions" (Henderson 1970: 160). Theoretical statements are to be regarded as a first approximation, a simplification, of the uniformities being considered. In line with his mentor, Homans always maintained that it was more important to state theoretical generalizations roughly and grossly, in a first approximation, than to try to account for all possible qualifications. He cautioned that being overly attracted by the details distracts the theorist from explaining his findings. For Homans, one goal of theorizing is to get "some intellectual control of a whole system" (1968: 2) through first approximations; another goal is to devise a conceptual scheme.

Henderson repeatedly told his students that in order to acquire intuitive familiarity with, and systemic knowledge of, phenomena they needed to first construct what he called a conceptual scheme. A *conceptual scheme* consists of a classification of variables (or concepts) that need to be taken into account when studying a set of phenomena. It also consists of a sketch of the given conditions within which the phenomena are to be analyzed. Finally, it must contain a statement that the variables are related to one another—and following Pareto, that relationship is usually seen as one of mutual dependence. Conceptual schemes were common in the natural sciences and included Willard Gibbs's physico-chemical system, Thomas Hunt Morgan's theory of the gene, and Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. In Henderson's judgment, Pareto's theory of the social system was "the most convenient conceptual scheme now available" in analyzing all interactions between persons (1970: 88–103).

As necessary as he considered it to be, however, Henderson regarded the conceptual scheme as nothing more than a useful and convenient way of thinking, a simple "walking stick," to be utilized for the specific purpose of analyzing uniformities (1970: 67). Henderson informed his students that the conceptual scheme was temporary; it was to be employed only as long as it remained useful, and he instructed his students to discard it when another way of thinking became more useful.

As a young man Homans was much enthralled with Henderson's notion of the conceptual scheme as a way of classifying phenomena and even developed his own for the study of small groups (to be discussed in detail below). Later, and again consistent with his teacher's directives, Homans eschewed the use of conceptual schemes for the development of theory in the form of propositions:

"Let us not fool around anymore with conceptual schemes," Homans told Roethlisberger in the late-1950s, "let us get some propositions to test and explain" (as quoted in Roethlisberger 1977: 244).

Homans's third great mentor was the Australian-born psychologist, Elton Mayo. Like Henderson, Mayo had been recruited by Dean Donham to come to the Harvard Business School and direct the School's Department of Industrial Research. Unlike Henderson, who, at his fatigue laboratory, examined the physiological effects of people at work, Mayo studied the psychological factors in the behavior of workers.

Mayo had a profound influence on Homans's intellectual development—an influence that Homans always acknowledged. For example, in 1962 he dedicated his collection of essays, *Sentiments and Activities* "To the memory of Elton Mayo." Later, toward the end of his life, Homans wrote that "Mayo stimulated my professional thinking more than anyone but Henderson" (1984: 135). It appears that Mayo influenced Homans in three distinct ways: (1) by a course of reading which he took with Mayo, (2) by Mayo allowing him to gain clinical training in interviewing, and (3) by Mayo introducing Homans to the Hawthorne studies of the Western Electric Company.

In 1933, when Homans was steeped in Pareto and thinking more and more about sociology, he asked Henderson what he should do to become a sociologist. Henderson recommended that he take a reading course with his friend and colleague at the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, Elton Mayo. Mayo's informal seminar was held in his dingy set of rooms in the old Brattle Inn in Cambridge. It was there that several students, including Homans, met over tea, once a week for several years.

Mayo began the course by having his students read and discuss the social anthropologists of the new "functional" school—Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski—both of whom Mayo had known personally. They poured over Radcliffe-Brown's first book, *The Andaman Islanders*, as well as Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Homans states that despite the rich descriptions in these ethnographies, Mayo was never much interested in the details of behavior in the Andaman or Trobriand Islands for their own sake. What he wanted his students to get from their reading in social anthropology was a notion of how human collaboration can be maintained in society (Homans 1962: 7). Homans particularly admired Malinowski and his *Crime and Custom in Savage Society*, believing that Malinowski gave a far better "feel," than either Radcliffe-Brown or Durkheim, for what human society is really like (Homans 1968: 6). And, as might be expected given Mayo's background, he also encouraged his students to read widely in psychology, including Pavlov's famous work on conditioned reflexes, as well as a great deal of Freud, Piaget, and Pierre Janet.

But Mayo never intended that the training of social scientists should be confined to book learning alone; he believed that clinical experience was absolutely necessary. As such, he arranged that, once a week during term-time, his students go to the Boston Dispensary's "thought-control clinic." There they interviewed patients who came to the dispensary complaining of ailments for which physi-

cians could find no physical basis. Thus, Homans credits Mayo with teaching him an essential tool for social scientists, and one that Homans himself later used to good effect when he did his field studies of working groups in industry: the nondirective interview.

Indeed, Mayo had previously conducted nondirective interviews with thousands of workers at the Hawthorne Works plant (on the outskirts of Chicago) of the Western Electric Company, manufacturers of equipment for the American Telephone and Telegraph Company. The early Hawthorne researches—which were essentially concerned with the productivity, satisfaction, and motivation of workers—were begun in 1924. Mayo was not involved with the design or implementation of the original experiments at the plant. It was only later, around 1927, that he was called in as chief advisor to interpret the findings. He also trained interviewers for the studies' interview program, which ran from 1928 to 1930. Homans states that Mayo took him to the Hawthorne plant a couple of times and showed him the famous Relay Assembly Room where, between 1927 and 1929, a small group of workers assembled terminal banks for telephone exchanges and were subjected to various conditions such as break length, working hours, type of work, and so on. Homans had absolutely no part in the Hawthorne researches, though, as he put it, "God knows I wrote more than enough about them at second hand" (Homans 1984: 139).[7]

Another significant intellectual influence on Homans's becoming a sociologist—an event at which many of the aforementioned people actively participated—was the so-called Pareto Circle. As Henderson became more interested in Mayo's experiments on human relations at work than in his own fatigue laboratory—that is to say, more interested in sociology than in physiology—he organized an informal seminar on Pareto's sociology. Since Homans was, at that time, one of the few persons in Cambridge to have read Pareto's *Traité de sociologie générale*, Henderson asked him "to serve as his legman and assistant in handling the arrangements for the seminar" (Homans 1984: 105).

The seminar was first offered in September, 1932. Aside from Henderson and Homans, those who attended regularly included Benny DeVoto; Elton Mayo; Fritz Roethlisberger; Talcott Parsons; the historian Crane Brinton; the philosopher Joseph Schumpeter; graduate students Kingsley Davis, Bernard Barber, and Robert K. Merton; as well as Boston lawyer, member of the Harvard Corporation, and Homans-family friend Charles P. Curtis Jr., with whom Homans would later coauthor *An Introduction to Pareto*.

In the seminar Henderson would read selected passages from the *Traité* slowly in French, elaborate on the significance of each point Pareto made, and then invite discussion. Concerning Pareto's sociology Henderson readily accepted three main prinicples which he imparted to Homans, and to which Homans, at least for a time, fully subscribed: (1) that many of the most important actions of people in society are not rational, or as Pareto put it, not "logico-experimental," (2) that society can be theoretically conceived as a social system with a mutual dependence of variables, (3) that the social system tends toward a state of equilibrium. While Henderson's faith concerning these and other

Paretian principles extended to the end of his life,[8] Homans, on the other hand, though he found reading the *Traité* and his participation in the Pareto Circle to be a great experience, ultimately decided about Pareto's sociology that he "could not build on it directly. It did not lend itself to cumulative growth" (Homans 1984: 116).[9] However that may be, Homans's very entrance into sociology was through Pareto.

There is one postcollege intellectual influence on Homans that is highly significant to his social exchange theory that simply cannot be ignored: the behavioral psychology of B.F. Skinner. Homans first met and became friends with Skinner when their terms in the elite Harvard Society of Fellows overlapped, 1934–36.[10] When Skinner returned to Harvard after the war as Professor of Psychology, their friendship revived. From his colleagues in the interdisciplinary Department of Social Relations Homans had heard a great deal about "leaning theories" and began to think about Skinner's behavioral psychology, which had always appealed to him intellectually. Soon after reading Skinner's *Science and Human Behavior* (1953) Homans came to the conclusion that his principles of behavioral psychology—especially as they concerned the idea of reinforcement—could explain, far better than functionalism, elementary human social behavior.

The Sociohistorical Context

George C. Homans came of age in the 1930s—an era in U.S. history that represented, for a select few, including Homans himself, the last days of "self-confident high society" chronicled in the novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald. But for the vast majority of Americans life during the 1930s represented the great human misery that was vividly captured by Homans's fellow-writer for the *Harvard Advocate* magazine, James Agee, in his stark depiction of three tenant families in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1939).[11]

The Great Depression undermined much of the faith in the resilience of the free-market economy and as a result Marxist study groups flourished even among students and junior faculty at Harvard. "But there were also students and faculty members who, though as disillusioned as the Marxists with the state of things, turned to Vilfredo Pareto instead of to the radical Left" (Coser 1985: 430). Upper-class persons like Homans felt threatened by the Marxist criticism of capitalism and in reaction looked to Pareto as "the bourgeois alternative to Marx." Homans explains his attraction to Pareto:

> I took to Pareto because he made it clear to me what I was already prepared to believe. I do not know all the reasons why I was ready for him, but I can give one. Someone had said that much modern sociology is an effort to answer the arguments of the revolutionaries. As a Republican Bostonian who had not rejected his comparatively wealthy family, I felt during the thirties that I was under personal attack, above all from the Marxists. I was ready to believe Pareto because he provided me with a defense [against Marxism]. (Homans 1962: 4)

But Homans's microsociology for which he is best known—his studies of small groups and his later development of social exchange theory—was forged, not in reaction to the Marxists, but in reaction to the functionalists. By the mid-1940s when he returned to Harvard as associate professor of sociology, the dominant theoretical framework in sociology and anthropology was that of functionalism, and Talcott Parsons was quickly becoming its chief exponent. By 1950, when Homans published his first original sociological treatise, *The Human Group*, functionalism's—and Parsons's—star was fast ascending and would almost completely dominate American theoretical sociology. It would continue to hold sway until the mid-1960s when Erving Goffman, Harold Garfinkel, and George Homans himself offered their alternative programs to Parsonian functionalism.

However, by the 1970s, Marxism had again returned to haunt Homans's mircosociological approach and conservative inclinations. As academic sociology became increasingly radicalized, Homans's social exchange theory (though to a significantly less degree than Parsons's functionalism), came under heavy attack for supposedly being a mere tool of the status quo. One critic in particular charged that, "Homans's distributive justice rules represent the first sophisticated intellectual argument and justification for the exploitation of social exchange transactions to maintain the power structure in society" (Ekeh 1974: 161). Then, as the alternating fads and passions of sociology and the larger society would have it, the 1980s—the era of Reaganomics, government deregulation, and the "greed is good" philosophy made famous by the character Gordon Gekko in the 1987 movie *Wall Street*—saw the resurgence of utilitarian theories in the social sciences. This brand of utilitarianism, this instrumental approach to explaining human behavior, took the form of rational choice theory—a conceptualization largely devoid of behavioral psychological assumptions—and Homans's social exchange theory was relegated to a mere footnote in its development.[12]

DOMAIN ASSUMPTIONS

While most sociological thinkers neglect to disclose their presuppositions concerning their views on individuals and society, Homans always explicitly stated his metatheoretical beliefs, or "values" (see for example, Homans 1978a, 1978b). Though far from popular with most sociologists of his time, and even now, Homans's articulated values clearly locate his sociology—but particularly his social exchange theory—at the intersection of the intellectual traditions of utilitarianism and positivism.

Individuals

A thorough understanding of Homans's notions about the dynamism of individuals—their behavior and social interactions—must begin with his ideas about

human nature. As a result of reading deeply in social anthropology, but in particular Raymond Firth's *We, the Tikopia* (1936), a field study of the society of a small Polynesian island, Homans came to the conclusion that people everywhere are possessed, generally speaking, of a single human nature. This is not to say that every individual personality is like every other, that all cultures are similar, or even that all human beings act in exactly the same way. For Homans, human nature is the same the world over only in the sense that people with similar past histories and similar present circumstances, are likely to behave similarly. Persistent patterns of behavior eventually produce social institutions, and Homans found that individuals under similar conditions, even in different time periods and in different societies, independently invented similar institutions. In examining the anthropological data on kinship, Homans discovered that one such social institution is the *avunculate*—the close relationship between a boy and his mother's brother. The avunculate appears as an institution in various societies and over widely separate periods of time, from ancient Germania to Tikopia Island.

Later, Homans postulated that the general principles of behavioral psychology, based on the influence of rewards and punishments, adequately describe human nature because they hold good for all individuals. However, under different given conditions different forms of actual behavior follow. One of these conditions involves the genetic factors that make individuals more or less likely to learn certain types of behavior (Homans 1979).

Individuals differ genetically, and this difference determines what concrete types of social behavior they are apt to learn. As Homans put it, "genetic differences affect behavior by affecting the contingencies in which learning takes place" (1978a: 539). Thus, Homans asserts that if we know enough about individuals' genetic differences, the general principles of behavioral psychology can be used to explain why people differ in what they learn. Indeed, "the principles of behavioral psychology themselves, evolved genetically" (Homans 1980: 391). Because he believed it crucial that sociologists understand the relationship between genetics and the learning of human behavior, Homans strongly advocated for the study of sociobiology (1986a: xxviii–xxix).

But it was the *actions* of individuals—their concrete social behavior—and not just their learning of social behavior that most concerned Homans. Beginning with his 1941 study of the social organization of the medieval English village, Homans notes that, "[w]hen I saw changes taking place in medieval England, I always saw persons acting, not organizations, institutions, or 'society,' though their actions created and maintained for a time all of these things, which also provided some of the contingencies for the further actions of persons" (1984: 188). For Homans, then, individuals, through their collective social behavior, ultimately make their institutions, and not institutions, individuals.[13]

In Homans's view, the traditional sociological understanding of the relationship between an individual's social behavior and institutions was problematic for two reasons. First, social scientists, including Skinner himself, tend to repeatedly distinguish "between institutions and persons, as if institutions did

not consist precisely of persons and their behavior" (Homans 1980: 392). Second, social scientists tend to forget that institutions (as well as societies and cultures) are not actors, and therefore cannot, as such, determine social behavior: "When we say that an institution acts on individuals, we mean that other individuals, who carry out the norms of the institutions more or less well, act on the individuals in question, who in turn conform more or less closely. And the institutional norms are themselves created by individuals" (Homans 1978b: 23). For Homans, institutions, "*are* human behavior and therefore they are to be explained by the characteristics of that behavior" (1962: 35).

But it was not enough for Homans, as a sociologist, to consider only the behavior or actions of individuals, he also had to take into account their *interactions* with other persons. Indeed, Homans, very early in his career, treated interaction as a central concept, or, better yet, a "class of variable," in the analysis of social behavior. Interaction, Homans explains, "is a measure of the frequency with which social behavior occurs, but the behavior may be of any kind, though it is most often talk" (1984: 164). Thus, for Homans, interaction, first and foremost, involves conversation that occurs between two or more persons.

Society

Basing his metasociology on what Viktor Vanberg (1975) called "the two sociologies," Homans distinguishes between his type of approach—*individualistic* sociology—which "concerns the way in which individuals create and maintain social structures" and—*structural* sociology—which "concerns the effects these structures, once created and maintained, have on the behavior of individuals or categories of individuals" (Homans 1983: 40). He argues that, historically, sociologists have tended to favor the structural approach, thus basically treating the behavior of individuals as the dependent variable. Putting the question baldly, Homans inquires of sociologists: "What is our subject matter finally *about*? Is it about men, or is it about societies"? (1962: 2). While Homans clearly answered the question in favor of the individual, he well understood that social structure could not be ignored.

Homans's great conviction was that sociology begin its analysis from the observed behavior of individuals, and not from roles, structures, institutions, and other abstractions. This is not to say that the latter are not real, only that they are created by individuals. For Homans, explaining how individuals create and maintain social structures requires taking into account the given conditions that influence individuals' behavior: their stimuli, rewards, and punishments. Once created, social structures exert back effects on the behavior of their makers (Homans 1987: ix). At bottom, "both the structures and their back effects consist of the behavior of individuals" (Homans 1984: 354), and therefore individualistic as well as structural sociology must consider the principles of behavioral psychology. Despite his preference for the individual, toward the end of his career, Homans admitted: "Yet I believe social structure to lie at the heart of sociology" (1984: 116).

Whatever the reason for his ambivalence concerning social structure, Homans, at least until the early 1950s when he began to earnestly employ the principles of behavioral psychology, was wholly devoted to the conceptualization of the *social system*—in both its macro and micro forms. Deeply influenced by Henderson's (and Pareto's) notion of a social system in which all the elements of a society are interrelated, Homans used the systemic model for his researches on English rural society in the High Middle Ages. For example, Homans asserts that it is a mistake to see the northwestern English landscapes of woodland and champion countries,

> as the result of isolated activities of men, economic or social, for such activities are in fact seldom isolated, but are found in a state of mutual dependence with many other activities. What is more, these activities are mutually dependent not only directly but also indirectly, in that they all take part in the functioning of the organic wholes or systems which are called societies, and these wholes are greater than and unlike the sums of their parts. Landscapes must be conceived of as the physical shell of such organic social wholes, each perpetuating through the centuries its particular organization. (Homans 1936: 342)

Later, in *The Human Group*, Homans again used the systemic model, this time at the micro level of analysis, in examining small groups, which he described as "internal systems" facing "external systems." The ultimate goal for the sociologist, according to Homans, was to "move from a study of the social system as it is exemplified in single groups toward a study of the system as it is exemplified in many groups, including groups changing in time" (1949: 336). But by the late 1950s Homans came slowly to the conclusion that human social systems were much less organic than what Henderson had believed. From that point on he all but abandoned the idea of the social system.

While his consideration of social structure and social system wavered, Homans remained steadfast in his focused analysis of the *small group*. Indeed, his interest in small groups began early, during his student days with Elton Mayo, who at that time was interpreting the results of the Hawthorne researches. Homans became thoroughly familiar with these researches, of which at least two were some of the most detailed studies of small groups that had yet been made: the Relay Assembly Test Room and the Bank Wiring Observation Room. He also was familiar with William F. Whyte's *Street Corner Society*, a study of a gang of corner boys in Boston's North End, as well as with numerous anthropological studies of kin groups in "primitive" societies, such as that of the Tikopia. In addition, Homans had practical experience commanding small warships manned by a small group "of not more than two hundred men, differing from other groups of comparable size in being isolated and self-contained, sometimes for weeks at a time" (Homans 1946: 294). Finally, he was influenced by an idea that had been going around Harvard during the 1940s: "If we wanted to establish the reality of a social system as a complex of mutually dependent elements, why not begin by studying a system small enough so that we could, so to speak, see all the way around it, small enough so that all the relevant observations could be

made in detail and at first hand?" (Homans 1962: 39). Homans's intimate familiarity with the social organization of small groups resulted in *The Human Group*. By the late 1950s when he turned to investigate the elementary forms of social behavior, Homans began to consider the "subinstitutional" aspects of small groups: the rewards and punishments that each member of a group gets from the behaviors of the other members.

While the observation of small groups had, for Homans, a practical, convenient advantage in the study of elementary social behavior—"for in them a number of people are interacting with one another in the same place within the same span of time, so that a single observer can economically collect many of the data he requires" (1962a: 295)—he made it clear that small groups are not the principal focus of sociological investigation. Small groups, Homans explains, are not *what* sociologists study, but *where* they often study their true subject matter, which is face-to-face social behavior.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

One of Homans's favorite aphorisms, which he delighted in reiterating, was that "good science is done by some of the damnedest methods" (1968: 4). Presumably by "methods" he meant not only the techniques used in gathering empirical data—the historical method, nondirective interviewing, participant observation—but also the deductive strategies through which theory is formulated. In either event, whatever the method or its purpose, Homans set a "supreme value" in telling and explaining "the truth" (Homans 1978b). In this and the following section, we look at the research and conceptual methods Homans used in his search for sociological truth.

The Historical Method

Since his first empirical research was on the organization of English society in the Middle Ages, which resulted in the monograph *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*, Homans, of necessity, had to painstakingly consult the precious few historical records available from that period. Indeed, Homans claims that he "studied the thirteenth century because it was the first from which enough documents survived to give us anything like an adequate picture of the social order" (1962: 12). And the main documents available were the manorial custumals—records of the labor-services due from the peasant tenants to the lords of their manors—and the manorial court rolls—records of the legal actions taken in court; these latter contained a great deal of information about the English rural villagers' customs of inheritance of land. As such, Homans's main empirical contribution to the study of English rural society was the mapping out of the different rules of inheritance followed by the villagers.

Aside from the pragmatics of translating (from the Latin) and scrutinizing these documents (as well as other primary and secondary sources), to learn more

about the social order of the medieval English village, Homans also took on a "historical method" in his sociology—a sociology concerned with time series. Accordingly he urged sociologists to learn more history and utilize the historical method in their own work. Of sociologists in the 1930s Homans wrote: "Before they can better the historians, the sociologists will have to do the work of the historians and learn some history. By and large they have been unwilling to do that kind of hard work" (1962: 13). In Homans's view, history adds a "dynamic dimension" to sociology. Half a century later, in 1986, he was happy to note the adoption of the historical method by the "new sociological historians," such as Barrington Moore Jr., Charles Tilly, Emmanuel Wallerstein, Theda Skocpol, and Arthur Stinchcombe, whose work Homans regarded as important and promising (Homans 1986a: xxvii).

Nondirective Interviewing

Despite being one of the twentieth century's foremost researchers of small groups, it is interesting that Homans did not utilize the most common research methods of social psychologists. For example, he never performed an experiment. This may have been because he was skeptical of the relationship between behavior exhibited in the laboratory and behavior exhibited in "real life" groups (Homans 1962c: 272; 1962d: 298; 1984: 299). He never carried out a survey. Probably because he believed that questionnaires "often revealed how people thought they ought to behave rather than how they really would behave when faced with similar decisions under the more precise and compelling pressures of real life" (Homans 1984: 298). And while he often argued for the use of statistical techniques in sociology (Homans 1986a: xv–xvii), he never even became a passable statistician. In his last published statement Homans reemphasized the methodological view that he had held throughout his career: "that first-hand observation and interviewing are the place from which all good sociology takes off" (1987: ix). Indeed, Homans's most frequently employed methods of research were participant observation and nondirective interviewing.

As we have already seen, Homans learned nondirective interviewing—the "art of provoking, and receiving, communications from others"—from Mayo at the Boston Dispensary and, later, the Boston City Hospital. There, Mayo's students, including Homans, listened to patients who complained of physical ills certified by the physicians to have no organic basis. Wearing the conventional white jackets of M.D.s, the students were each assigned a particular patient with whom they were left alone. They were simply to encourage the patients to talk as freely as they liked and in any way they liked about themselves and their troubles, but particularly about their pasts. While the student interviewers were instructed by Mayo to make possible interpretations, they were not to inflict these interpretations on the patient. In other words, the interviewers were not to attempt psychotherapy. After the interview Mayo's students were to write down as much of it as they could recall. About this early experience with the nondirective interviewing of patients, Homans wrote many decades later: "I am grateful

to Mayo for arranging this priceless opportunity for us. I learned to talk to people rather than just collect statistics" (1984: 148). The skill of nondirective interviewing prepared Homans well for later research in the field of industrial sociology.

In 1949–50 Homans conducted two studies, carried out by field observation and nondirective interviewing, in the Customer's Accounting Division of the Boston Edison Company. The first of these studies (Homans 1953a) dealt with the "problem of status" among clerical workers who complained that the high status conferred on them by some features of their job was not reflected in other features. For this study Homans interviewed, on company time in a private room away from the office floor, nineteen of the accounting division's ledger clerks.

Before the interview Homans would ask each ledger clerk individually whether she was willing to talk to him; all but one agreed. The interviews, which lasted from one to two hours, were nondirective except in two respects. In order to learn about the ledger clerks' attitudes toward their job, Homans began the interview with the question, "How do you like your job?" Then, in order to obtain further evidence on informal social organization, Homans would ask the ledger clerks, "Who are your close friends here?" He then recorded each interview as he remembered it as soon as possible after it finished. During the interviewing period Homans was in daily contact with the Boston Edison Company's accounting division office to make arrangements for the next interviews. When all the interviews were completed, he returned to make first-hand observations of the ledger clerks at work. He did this to check his first impressions and to make further interaction records. Despite his reliance on observation, Homans makes it clear that it was not through observation that he discovered the "status problem" among the ledger clerks; instead the problem emerged "from the attitudes expressed in interviews" (1953a: 8).

The second study (Homans 1954) to come out of his research in the Customers Accounting Division of the Boston Edison Company dealt with ten "cash posters"—young women involved in a complicated form of semimechanized double-entry bookkeeping. This study focused on the relations between repetitive work, individual behavior, and the social organization of the group of cash posters. Here again Homans began the interviews with the cash posters with the question, "How do you like your job?" Most of them replied that they liked their job, to one degree or another. However, since the interviews were nondirective, meaning he couldn't probe the posters on specific issues, Homans got no detailed systematic information on the reasons why they liked their job. But precisely because the interviews were nondirective Homans maintains that the frequency with which the cash posters *spontaneously* mentioned some of their job's features, such as the working group's general friendliness, "is a pretty good index of their importance to the posters" (1954: 727).

Finally, in order to demonstrate Homans's adroitness with the casual, conversational style of nondirective interviewing, a few lines from his interview with one of the cash posters, Helen LoPresti, are printed below. Note Homans's

minimal input, and when it occurs it is only to keep LoPresti talking and to stimulate her confidence in him:

> LoPresti: "You have nothing to worry about. You do your work and that's that. I worry about a lot of things. Am I normal, you must be asking yourself? Well, *am* I normal?"
> Homans: "Don't be silly." (Giggle from both.)
> LoPresti: "I don't want to get into a spot like I was in at _____."
> (Homans 1954: 732)[14]

Participant Observation

Homans's sole use of the method of participant observation was in the two aforementioned studies of the Customers Accounting Division of the Boston Edison Company—"the most enjoyable I have ever undertaken" (Homans 1983: 37). From December 1949 through April 1950 he conducted systematic observations of the interactions of the sixty employees—supervisors and clerical workers—of the accounting division. The clerical workers—specifically ten cash posters and twenty ledger clerks—all of whom were women, were engaged in keeping accounts of the payments made by the 450,000 customers who received electric power from the company (Homans 1962e: 91).

Homans (1953a: 5) began by obtaining the approval of the management and the union executive committee for making the study. He explained the purposes and methods of the study to the supervisors of every echelon who were responsible for the accounting division. He then made the same explanation to the supervisors and workers of the division itself, assuring them that he would make no private report of his findings either to the management or to the union, and that if he published any report, he would not quote anything any worker said to him in such a way that it could be traced back to her to her detriment.

Immediately after these explanations, Homans situated himself at a small table at the back of the large room in which the division worked, so placed that it commanded a substantially clear view of the whole room. With this as a base of operation, he spent about a month introducing himself to each of the workers individually, learning various clerical procedures, some of them quite complicated, that the division carried on, and getting a general impression of behavior in the room. According to Homans, the period of social constraint due to his presence as a stranger seemed to end after he attended the workers' Christmas office party. From then on, he did not get any indication from the supervisors, the union representative, or the office boy in the room that the clerical workers' behavior was any different from what it had been before he came in (Homans 1953a: 5).

Once he felt accepted by the workers, Homans then spent two weeks making systematic observations of interaction in the room, specifically of which persons talked to which other persons, and how often. With sixty persons in the room, Homans could not keep a continuous interaction record, so he adopted a simple but ingenious sampling procedure: every fifteen minutes he would scan

the room and make a note of which persons were talking together at that time. Because he could only see *which persons* were interacting, this sampling method of observation, plus the distances at which the observations were made, precluded accurate recording of *originations* and *receipts* of interaction. Homans's quantitative record of interpersonal contacts among the workers revealed an inverse relation between talking and output. "In fact, some of the girls who talked most also produced most" (Homans 1953a: 5).

While Homans's systematic quantification of workers' interactions is clearly in the tradition of positivistic sociology, his general method of participant observation—his own interactions, wittingly or unwittingly, with his subjects—is certainly part of a humanistic sociology, as depicted in the following scenario:

> The day before a [cash poster] left the company to get married, the others, in the afternoon "relief" period, decorated her desk and covered it with candy and presents. Since none of the supervisors felt he should take it on, the girls assigned me the job of handing out the presents and, far more unnerving, of pinning a corsage on the girl who was leaving. In this way I came to be of some use in division society. (Homans 1954: 725)

Despite his somewhat limited involvement in empirical research, Homans always advocated for the use of nondirective interviewing and participant observation in sociology for two main reasons. First, he believed that intuitive familiarity with the facts can only be "acquired by the scientist's watching and talking to people at first hand, and field studies alone provide the opportunity." Second, he believed that the fundamental principles of social behavior "can best be worked out after direct observation and interviewing—and I do not mean with formal questionnaires—of a few people interacting with one another" (Homans 1986a: xvi). But Homans also offered a cautionary note to the sociologist working only with these methods in collecting data: "he will get information in scraps on a whole series of topics. It is simply not economical to stick to one [method] and neglect the others. Think what he would waste! He must have a set of mental pigeonholes and accumulate matter slowly in each one. His hypotheses are tested by the accumulation" (Homans 1949: 332). While participant observation and nondirective interviewing constituted the storehouse of his research methodology, mental pigeonholing and hypothesis-testing informed part of Homans's conceptual methodology.

CONCEPTUAL METHODOLOGY

At bottom, George Homans's conceptual methodology addresses the nature of sociological theory: what it should be, what it should look like, and what it should do. Like most of the other students and faculty connected with Harvard's Department of Sociology, and later, the Department of Social Relations, including Pitirim Sorokin, Talcott Parsons, and Robert K. Merton, Homans believed

that there was more prestige in being a theorist than in being a concrete sociologist, a collector of data. So it was to theoretical work that Homans first turned his attention in the late 1930s, when he formulated his conceptual scheme. By the mid-1950s, in grappling with the "Parsons problem" and studying the philosophers of science, Homans finally arrived at the notion of theory as explanation. During this twenty-year period his sociology changed considerably as he traversed several theoretical areas, from systems functionalism to behaviorism. Through it all Homans remained steadfast in his search for sociological truth.

The Conceptual Scheme

Early in his career Homans had learned from L.J. Henderson that in order to organize knowledge of a particular social phenomenon, in order to systematically relate the various topics of that phenomenon, a conceptual scheme was necessary. Following Pareto, Henderson believed that the subject of interest in sociology—be that a society, a community, or a group—is best conceptualized as a social system. A conceptual scheme of a social system provides the sociologist "with the mental pigeonholes he needs and some notion of the relations between the materials in them, and it will help him to new discovery if he does not let it altogether master his thinking" (Homans 1949: 334).

During the mid-1930s Homans came in contact with Eliot D. Chapple and Conrad M. Arensberg, graduate students in anthropology at Harvard, who sought to identify the chief variable in the social sciences that most easily lends itself to measurement in terms of order, frequency, and duration. The variable they chose, they called *interaction*, it "being an event in which an action of one man was the stimulus for an action of another" (Homans 1962: 37). In fact, interaction was a whole class of variables that could be measured in regard to how often and how long a given person spoke in conversation; how often and how soon that person initiated talk or other action either at the beginning of a conversation or after a pause; how many persons within a given place or time that person interacted with and with how many he or she initiated the interaction (Homans 1983: 14). From then on Homans began to think of other classes of variable that could be added to interaction to account for, not its order, frequency, and duration, but its *content*. He came up with two others, which he referred to as "sentiment" and "activity." In classifying these three variables—interaction, sentiment, and activity—Homans began the construction of what Henderson had taught him to call a conceptual scheme.

Sentiment is behavior expressive of a person's attitudes toward other persons and includes the "liking and disliking for individuals, approval and disapproval of the things they do" (Homans 1947: 14). Not sentiments themselves, but their manifestations—"in facial expression, in bodily attitudes, above all, in what people say"—can be observed and subsequently measured. *Activity* (previously called "function") refers to any action that people perform that may not require interactions with others or express interpersonal sentiments. Many such activities can be operationalized and measured; for example, as in the case of

"output," the numbers of a particular object a factory worker produces in the course of an hour or day. Finally, and again in line with Henderson (and Pareto), Homans argued that the three classes of variables were interdependent. This then became the first version of his conceptual scheme that Homans preliminarily sketched in the last chapter of *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*.

In the second version of the conceptual scheme, which Homans wrote during the war and called the "Willemstad sketch," he added the notion that interaction, sentiments, and activities (now called "operations")—the *elements of social behavior*—should be considered in terms of a group's primary and secondary systems.

Every group, as a social system, is constituted by a boundary, a conceptual demarcation that distinguishes the system itself from its environment. Within this boundary all emergent interactions, sentiments, and activities are mutually dependent in the behavior of the group members. For example, in industry a number of workers may be performing work activities in the same room. This performance of their work activities makes it likely that they will engage in interaction. Furthermore, this interaction increases positive sentiment among the workers, which will increase their interaction still more. This set of relations forms the group's *primary system*. A group's *secondary system* is the physical and social environment that exists outside its boundary. This may consist of required or planned activities and interactions, as well as the physical setting. And just as the elements of social behavior are mutually dependent in the primary system, so too is the primary system mutually dependent on the secondary system. Thus, the pattern according to which the management of a factory lays out the physical equipment of a department may well affect the worker's interpersonal relations within it. Homans's third and final version of the conceptual scheme, which includes all of the aforementioned ideas, was eventually published as an article with the title "A Conceptual Scheme for the Study of Social Organization" (1947).

Later, in *The Human Group*, where Homans applied the conceptual scheme to five concrete studies of small groups, he made a couple of nomenclatural changes. First, he now settled on the term "activities" for what he had initially called "functions" and then "operations." Second, he changed the terms "primary system" and "secondary system" to *internal system* and *external system*, respectively. And later still Homans made several substantive changes in his thinking that not only led to the rejection of his own conceptual scheme but to the rejection of the very notion of the conceptual scheme as Henderson had proposed it. These changes in his thinking were stimulated by what Homans called the "Parsons problem" (1962: 43; 1984: 303).

The Parsons Problem

As his thinking about theoretical matters changed, so too did Homans's ideas about social systems and conceptual schemes also change. To begin with, shortly after publishing *The Human Group* he realized that he had made a mis-