SOCIAL THEORY, POLITICS AND POLICY

Some theoretical remarks*

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> *We must try to create a period of theoretical integration, an integration that must be carried out with the same sense of responsibility which the specialists always feel in approaching their particular problems.*
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> *(Karl Mannheim[1])*

There is a distinct difference between Social Theory and Sociological Theory. The latter is always closely linked to empirical research and consists mainly of verifiable or falsifiable hypotheses that can be operationalized in terms of standard research procedures. However, consciously or (in many cases) unconsciously, such hypotheses depend on general presuppositions about reality – i. e. about human behavior, social interactions, social systems and structures, cultural values and norms, relationships between actors and systems, dynamics of input and output in systems, processes of change and development, etc. For example, it makes a difference for a particular sociological hypothesis, whether one views human actions in terms of exchange or in terms of symbolic interaction. Likewise, the notion of empirical reality as a measurable and exactly definable field of operation differs from the more phenomenological idea that this reality is basically the ever unfinished upshot of ongoing social constructions and deconstructions. As to change, there is of course a marked difference between the idea of development as a gradual evolution of differentiating functions, the idea of development as a distinct progress of humanity, or the idea of development as a process of modernization which is neither evolutionary because of the predominance of the chance factor, nor progressive because of the negative effects any well-developed modernity may have on the human condition.

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* This slightly altered paper was part of a Liber Amicorum which was dedicated to the late Dutch sociologist Mark van de Vall: K. Mesman Schultz c. s. (eds.), *Between Sociology and Sociological Practice. Essays on Social Policy Research*, published by the Institute for Applied Social Sciences, Nijmegen, 1993.

1 Karl Mannheim, *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction*, 1940, London, 1960, 10th ed., p. 31.

1. The nature of social theory

The exploration and formulation of such presuppositions about reality is, in the strict sense of these concepts, social rather than sociological theory.[2] There is a custom in German sociology to speak of *Gesellschaftstheorie*. This type of theory has some distinct features which ought to be singled out in order to apprehend its heuristic fruitfulness.

To begin with, social theory, not being subjected to the strict demands of operationalization, does not and should not shun generalizations. To use a metaphor, social theory is not, like sociological theory, interested in specific and distinct trees and bushes, but tries to get the whole forest into focus, as from a helicopter point of view. The generalizations of social theory may easily slide off in semi-philosophical considerations and result in hazy and abstruse abstractions. This has indeed been the case frequently and has given this type of theory a negative image. The intention of social theory, however, is to approach reality in a holistic manner in order to allow its specific details, singled out by empirical research, to be placed and interpreted in a heuristic context, i. e. in a meaningful *Gestalt*.

A second characteristic of social theory is closely related to this. This type of theorizing is in almost all cases strongly comparative. To continue the metaphor, it not only focuses on the forest as a whole but also tries to grasp conceptually the distinct differences between this particular forest and its surroundings (meadows, other forests, rivers, etc.). If we substitute "forest" by "society", social theory always compares this particular society with societies that differ geographically and historically. It is hoped that through such differentiations the particular features of this specific society will be illuminated. For instance, in order to get a clearer view of the process of democratization in France, Tocqueville focused on British and particularly on American society and culture. Likewise, when he set out to understand rationally (i. e. scientifically) the birth and development of Western capitalism (note the generalization!), Weber focused his attention on the cultures of ancient China and India, realizing that religion, in particular ethics, constituted the very heart of these cultures.

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2   The by now 'classic' statement about social theory is by Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 1949, New York–London, 1964, ninth ed. See in particular pp. 3–18. For a more recent discussion see: Roberto M. Unger, *Law in Modern Society. Toward a Criticism of Social Theory*, New York–London, 1976, in particular chapter 1 "The Predicament of Social Theory", pp. 1–46. Tom Campbell's notion of "theory of society" comes close to the idea of *Gesellschaftstheorie*. See his *Seven Theories of Human Society*, Oxford 1981. As to Sociological Theory proper see e. g. Jonathan H. Turner, *The Structure of Sociological Theory*, Homewood, Illinois, 1974.

To grasp the intricate workings of classification Durkheim and Mauss engaged in comparative, anthropological analyses.

A third feature of social theory is the undeniable fact that sensitive intuition and artistic imagination play a constitutive role in it, whereas sociological theory may perhaps admit them to the first phase of hypothesis construction but generally tends to ban them during the research and the final formulation of the theory. The ever-expanding equality of conditions which Tocqueville viewed as a historical inevitability, haunted him not just because he belonged to the higher nobility of France which fell victim to it in the revolution of 1789. It haunted him intellectually, as a social and political theorist. He knew intuitively that the process he called "the democratic revolution" was the very essence of development and modernization and therefore inevitable. His whole intellectual life was focused on the rational understanding of what he saw as an ever expanding equality of living conditions. Durkheim had similar intuitions when he studied the social division of labor or the sociological and socio-psychological varieties of suicide. His central concern was the threat of anomie. The intuition and imagination that lay at the foundations of social theory might again, as in the case of its generalizations, degenerate. Wild speculations, often rather ideological by nature and intention, have been propounded under the flag of "sociological imagination". At the very same time, however, heuristically fruitful visions and conceptualizations have been produced by them also. They exerted a deepening influence on sociological empirical research and on sociologial theory.

Fourth, the concepts of social theory are in general not empirical in the sense that they do not depict empirical reality, i. e. empirical facts, relationships and processes. There is, to phrase it differently, not necessarily a fit or correspondence between concepts and facts. In fact, the concepts of social theory are usually "ideal types" in the neo-Kantian sense of the word: heuristic devices which over-emphasize on purpose certain dimensions of empirical reality and then place them in an artificially rational context. In German neo-Kantian parlance: the aim of "ideal types" is not *Abbildung* but, on the contrary, willful *Umbildung*. The "ideal types" – "ideal" means "artificial", "analytically constructed" – comprise a make-believe reality of extremes. For example, Weber transformed the rather socio-philosophical concepts *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, forged by Tönnies, into artificial types of human behavior, placed on the extreme ends of a gliding scale, a conceptual continuum: *Gemeinschaftshandeln* and *Gesellschaftshandeln*. Existential reality somehow moves between these extremes and by comparing this artifical scale with actually occurring behavior one may better understand the dynamics of human behavior within specific sociological and historical circumstances. Social theory knows

many of such "ideal types" which intend to illuminate the dynamics of empirical reality: "mechanical" and "organic solidarity" (Durkheim), "aristocracy" and "democracy" (Tocqueville), "traditional", "charismatic" and "legal-rational legitimacy" (Weber), "functional" and "substantial rationality" (Mannheim), "folk-urban continuum" (Redfield), "status" and "contract" (Maine), etc. It should be noted that these seemingly static concepts intend to illustrate and illuminate the dynamics of socio-cultural reality!

A fifth characteristic of social theory is the fact that it often comes very close to normative, if not clearly ideological points of view. It was in particular Max Weber who always tried to minimize this undeniable element of social theory. He strongly believed that social sciences, and thus also all theoretical endeavors within their frames of reference, ought to heed the difference in logical status between philosophical statements of faith and scientific statements of fact, lest both – faith and science – would suffer severe losses. If one, for instance, sets out to investigate empirically and understand theoretically a particular religious belief within a particular group of people, one ought to put one's own beliefs – one's own values and norms – between brackets for the duration of the investigation, and they should stay out of the ensuing interpretation as much as possible. If one does not abstain from value-judgments, one runs the risk of saying more about one's own values and norms than about those of the people under investigation.

However, as is well known, this Weberian stance as to the conscious abstention from value-judgements in the social sciences has been rejected recurrently, often together with his neo-Kantian "Umbildungs"-logic of the "ideal types". Social theory in the tradition of the *Frankfurter Schule*, for instance, is willfully normative, and propagated as a Critical Theory. Weber, however, definitely favored normative, critical ideas and theories but would refer them to the domain of social philosophy and to the political arena. At the end of his "classic" essay on puritanism and capitalism he vented his normative concerns about modernity and modern man. He coined the often quoted notion of the iron cage in which the sciences, technology and bureaucracy keep us hostage. It is comparable to Tocqueville's observation of the velvet tyranny by which a bureaucratized, egalitarian democracy controls modern man. Durkheim too came to the normative conclusion that anomie – the pervasive lack of a meaningful order, a *nomos* – threatens each society that sets out to develop and modernize. It is obvious, there is no watershed between abstinence from value-judgments and willfully normative statements in social theory.

Sixth, as the adjective "social" indicates, this type of theory is not limited to sociology. It has an interdisciplinary function in that it incorporates sociological, anthropological, and psychological forms of thought and theorems, while in

particular the disciplines of history and political science play a constitutive role in it. Social theory, as will be discussed next, has a long intellectual history and has never really surrendered to the rather intensive professionalization and specialization of the contemporary social sciences. It, in fact, shows a clear disrespect for disciplinary boundaries and interests, which is inevitable because of its generalizing and comparative nature.

Finally, social theory stems form an older tradition and therefore has a richer fund of knowledge than sociological theory which actually emerged relatively recently. In fact, sociological theory emerged when modern socio-logical research within a strictly empirical code or paradigm began to develop. Social theory, on the contrary, goes back to Aristotle and Plato, can be found in much of Augustine's writings, was part of Aquinas's impressive body of thought, and contributed much to the fund of philosophical knowledge of Western civilization. No expert in social theory, for example, could afford to neglect the writings of Montesquieu, Rousseau, Voltaire and Vico. It was not, however, until the 19th century that a type of social theory emerged which was of direct relevance to sociological research, not in the least because it was much less speculative and metaphysical.

From the (late) 19th century onwards, social theory remained closely linked to empirical observations and later increasingly to empirical research as well. Alexis de Tocqueville comes to mind immediately. Later Emile Durkheim, Herbert Spencer, Georg Simmel, Max Weber, and Karl Mannheim added to this tradition their conceptualizations and theory formations. They are by now "classics" in the sense that they manage to inspire new generations of social scientists time and again. These "classics", incidentally, are in danger of acquiring a mythological status and falling victim to repetitive exegeses, as if they represent important sociological revelations. Such scholastic exercises rob the "classics" of their inspiring potency. Their relevance is rather of an altogether different kind: they are the shoulders of giants on which we stand in order to obtain a better view of and insight into society, culture and history.[3]

2. Social Politics and Social Policy

In the social sciences various rather subtle but quite important conceptual distinctions have gradually faded out. The blurring of three of them is particularly fateful: organization and institution, power and authority, and politics and

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3   For the expression "on the shoulders of giants" see the delightful essay by Robert K. Merton, *On the Shoulders of Giants. A Shandean Postscript*, New York, 1965.

policy. Organization and institution represent quite different dimensions of social structure.[4] Power and authority are quite different dimensions of influence.[5] Politics and policy pertain to different aspects of political practice.[6] These are not merely theoretical distinctions. They do have a bearing on practice since they represent mental orientations that have a direct impact on speech and behavior.

Reduced to its essence the difference between politics and policy can be formulated as such: policy represents the legal and organizational instruments by means of which the goals of politics are being realized. Politics is substantially rational in that it incorporates public and parliamentarian debates on the status quo and the future either of society as a whole, or of societal components, or of specific societal arrangements.[7] These debates are goal-setting and occur within the frame of reference of general norms and values. Typical subjects of such political debates are, for instance, the position and future of a particular nation-state and its culture(s) within a unified Europe, the status and position of urban regions vis-à-vis the provinces and the central government, the needed transformations of the welfare state, the mutual relationships between the public and the private sectors in society, the strictures of economic development in view of a sustainable growth, the degree and nature of integration of cultural minorities, the moral limits of medical technology, the security of citizens in daily life under the conditions of heightened and intensified criminality, the societal and political participation of citizens in terms of a contemporary kind of citizenship, etc.

Politics, in other words, is a frame and goal-setting activity, not just for politicians but for ordinary citizens as well. If one is engaged in debates about and activities regarding the affairs of society – the *polis* of modern man – one is in Aristotle's words a "political animal". It is typically modern that politics too has professionalized. We have professional politicians working in various political organizations: city council, parliament, political party, workers' union, employers' organization, etc. In a democracy however politics is never left to these political professionals and specialists in their political organizations. In a vital democracy, all citizens engage in politics.

The concept of policy refers to the fabrication and employment of legal and organizational instruments by means of which the aims, the ends, the goals set

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4   This conceptual distinction was discussed in details in my *De samenleving als schouwspel*, Utrecht, 1991, pp. 71–81.

5   See also *ibid.*, pp. 120–130.

6   The distinction of politics and policy was briefly discussed in my *De culturele factor*, Culemborg, 1988, pp. 162–165.

7   This conceptual distinction was briefly discussed in *ibid.*, pp. 162–165.

by politics can be realized. If politics is predominantly a matter of substantial rationality, policy is much more a functionally rational activity.[8] If there are any values at play here, it is the (rather "thin") values of efficiency and effectivity. That is, the instruments of policy ought to be geared towards the specific goals that have been set. In addition, they ought to save as much energy and money as possible. That is, policy is always restricted by the demands of *feasibility*. As a result, feasibility studies and evaluation studies lie at the heart of all policy research.

It is obvious that politics and policy, defined in terms of ends and means, goals and instruments, are, logically, inseparably linked. However, sociologically the two have been driven apart in the process of modernization. It still makes a great deal of sense to define modernization, following "classic" social theorists, as a process of pervasive rationalization. This, however, has been a very specific kind of rationalization: due to an ever expanding structural differentiation and because of the pervasive impact of formal bureaucracy, the substantial (value-) rationality has been superseded by functional rationality. Modern man, to reformulate this "cultural law" somewhat simplistically, is very good at designing and applying instruments, methods, techniques, and procedures – in short: means – but often at loss, if it comes to a coherent and substantive understanding of reality. (Lately, the latter is elevated to the status of philosophical virtue by labelling it "post-modernism".) In other words, the rationalization of modernity consists of the rapid and pervasive expansion of functional rationality at the expense of an atrophying substantial (value-) rationality.

This process has caused a fateful imbalance in the relationships between means and ends in modern society. Substantial rationality, we have seen, is needed in order to be able to formulate and set clear goals. If it weakens because of its supersedure by functional rationality, we end up in a society that designs and employs means (techniques, instruments, methods, procedures) for ends (goals, aims, objectives) that are not clear at all. In fact, one may expect that these means and methods themselves become the final goals and aims which, of course, is highly irrational. Weber and Mannheim both were aware of this perverse effect of rationalization which by now can be observed

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8   Karl Mannheim, as is well known, distinguished, in addition to substantial rationality as the human capacity to view and experience reality as a meaningful *Gestalt*, functional rationality. This pertains to the capability of man to design and use instruments, means, methods, techniques, procedures by which aims, ends, goals can be realized. He also developed the heuristically very useful idea that in the process of modernization man's substantial rationality became gradually overshadowed, if not overpowered by functional rationality. See his *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction*, 1940, London, 1960, 10th ed. pp. 51–58. For a similar argument see Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 1924, translated by J. Wilkinson, New York, 1964.

empirically in many contemporary organizations and institutions: bureaucracy and methodology for the sake of bureaucracy and methodology.

3.   The alleged crisis of politics

Needless to say, this very imbalance also affects the relationship between politics and policy. I defined the latter in terms of means and instruments, the former in terms of ends and goals. It can indeed be observed that policy has by now superseded politics, that in fact policy is often viewed as being identical with politics. As a result, political debates have been transformed gradually into policy debates in which the predominant values are effectivity and efficiency which, in terms of worldview and ethos, are rather "thin" values. The dominant issue in these policy debates is feasibility. The general substantive issues of politics such as justice, safety, equality and liberty, national culture and sub-cultures (urban, regional, ethnic), national sovereignty and European unification, the quality of life and sustainable growth, and many more have, as it were, evaporated or are only discussed ad hoc and within relatively closed circles.

There is a lack of public debate on these issues. The discussions in parliament – often within specialized committees – are almost exclusively functionally rational talks on issues of policy. It is rare to find a politician – member of the parliament or of the cabinet – who delivers a speech inside or outside the parliament that transcends the limits of policy and deals, theoretically and philosophically, with substantive, political issues. Equally rare is the politician who publishes an essay that contributes to political thought, let alone exerts influence on political practice.[9] The process has in fact led to a specific type of politician: the super-bureaucrat who is good at feasibility calculations, whose thoughts and actions are steered by the dominant values of effectivity and efficiency, and whose prime concern is power. In most cases, however, he will severely lack substantial rationality, that is vision, comprehensive overview, creative non-conformity, and thus authority. There are, nowadays, many

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9   In the relatively small world of Dutch politics the leader of the Liberal Party, F. Bolkestein, contributed to the public political debate by various speeches and lectures, and in particular by well-written, at times even witty essays. (Cf. his *De engel en het beest*, Amsterdam, 1990.) A rare exception in the present cabinet is the christian-democratic minister of justice, E. Hirsch Ballin, former university professor of law. He too participates actively in the public debate on substantial issues. However, all this should not be read as an indictment of policy, the values of efficiency and effectivity, and the issue of feasibility. On the contrary, they ought to be taken for granted as the instrumental conditions for a substantially rational involvement in politics.

powerful experts in policy but few states(wo)men who are authoritative leaders of politics.

These policy experts have in many cases amassed considerable portions of power. Yet, in general, they lack authority. No wonder that this modernization of politics which caused a spectacular growth of autonomy on the part of policy, has led to a growing discontent on the part of the electorate. Despite the many efforts of the media to present the world of politics as a stage or an arena in which an allegedly spectacular drama of power is performed, ordinary citizens are incapable of experiencing all this as either relevant or interesting. For quite a while now, the political play of power has been transformed into a policy exchange of feasibilities. It is indeed too much to ask from ordinary citizens to be truly (i. e. mentally, existentially) involved in such seemingly futile exchanges. The present crisis of politics is a crisis of a one-sided functionally rational policy which has become autonomous, disengaged from substantially rational politics, and thus intrinsically boring.

4.   The contribution of Social Theory

Applied sociology is the sociology of social problems, geared towards the reduction of these problems through social policy. The latter is often defined as "planned social change".[10] Various sociological theories and theorems, combined with methodological considerations, have been constructed within the frame of reference of this problem reducing applied sociology and its concomitant social policy. In The Netherlands Mark van de Vall, who has also "operated" academically in the United States of America, has been one of the most prominent and productive sociologists in this area.[11] It is my contention that social theory, as discussed above, can only contribute indirectly to this applied sociology and its social policy research. If there is any contribution and influence to speak of – which can be debated – it is only through social theory's impact on social politics as a field of discourse distinguishable from social policy.

In line with what was said above about the demise of politics and the isolation of policy (to the detriment of both), we ought to face the question

10 See e. g. M. van de Vall, "Sociological Practice: Problems, Theory and Methods", in: *Knowledge and Policy. The International Journal of Knowledge Transfer*, 4: 3 (Fall 1991), pp. 3–9.

11 See e. g. his *Labor Organizations*, Cambridge, 1970, which is the translation of his Dutch dissertation on labor unions. From his many articles on policy research can be mentioned "A Comparative Case Method for 'Local Molar' Program Evaluation and Adjustment", in: *Clinical Sociology Review*, 1989 (7), pp. 52–63.

whether social policy too has not been subjected to the forces of modernization to the extent that it has become predominantly functionally rational i. e. formalistic, abstract, devoid of substance – a plaything for specialists and over-professionalized experts. The question is then also what is in fact the content of social politics nowadays. Social politics ought to be the matrix of social policy – its fertile soil of substantially rational ideas and visions, its critical context of theories and theorems that transcend disciplinary boundaries as well as geographical and historical borders. Without this matrix, social policy research and its applied-sociological theory formation may reach high levels of intellectual sophistication, yet low levels of actual productivity in terms of problem reduction, let alone problem solving.

It is at precisely this point that social theory can demonstrate its usefulness. It ought to contribute to the socio-political debates on the future and necessary transformations of the welfare state, the nature and developments of urban problems (the drug addicts, the homeless, the new underclass, etc.), the integration and relative autonomy of cultural (ethnic) minorities, the social and psychological effects of structural unemployment, the role of education in view of various social problems, the moral and often immoral dimensions of modernity, etc. There ought to be all sorts of public debates on these issues of social politics, not just in the parliament, but in many different organizational and institutional settings as well.

Social theory can contribute to these debates which are, it must be said once more, the general and substantially rational matrix for the much more specific and empirical domains of applied sociology and its social policy research. Without the latter, the former remains free-floating and lacks the force of commitment and practical applicability. However, applied sociology and social policy research that is not borne by socio-political debates and a sound social theory run the risk of sliding off into an over-specialized and over-professionalized obscurantism which is neither heuristically nor practically useful.

5.   On the shoulders of Mannheim

In short, social theory and social policy research depend on each other. If one ruminates about this strained relationship which ought to be one of intellectual kinship but is often one of mutual estrangement, and if one scans the history of socio-theoretical thought, one "classic" social theorist in particular stands out as a model for such an interaction. He started his intellectual career as a professional philosopher but moved in the direction of social theory and empirical sociology after a rather unhappy participation in the Bela Kuhn revolt in Budapest,

whose Marxist ideology he did not subscribe to.[12] Under the dramatic impact of the two world wars which altered the societies and cultures of Europe fundamentally, he began to design a social theory which he hoped would contribute, in a substantially rational manner, to the reduction of the many social problems. It was, admittedly, a Grand Theory – a theory of planning which he intended to be a planning for freedom.[13] Like his "intellectual cousin" Lord Beveridge whom he regretfully did not meet (what a splendid partnership it would have been!), Karl Mannheim designed a theory of a truly democratic Welfare State, and he did so in the middle of the nightmare of the Second World War.

Here we encounter the type of social theory which still is of great relevance to the debates on social politics and to the research of an applied sociology geared towards the reduction, if not solution of social problems. In particular, Mannheim will be intellectually akin to those social scientists who still have personal and vivid recollections of that war. But then, our days of rapid changes and transformations, and of great complexities and varieties, are certainly no less confusing. In a way, we are less prepared to face these problems because we lack the certainty and clarity of values and norms which Mannheim's and Beveridge's contemporaries still possessed, or at least believed they possessed.

That certainly makes us more open-minded and more flexible. It makes us also more vulnerable, as is demonstrated for instance by the ease with which post-modernist fads and fashions get hold on contemporary (semi-) theorists. Richard Rorty, the witty neo-pragmatist from the United States, was right when he exclaimed: "We have become so open-minded that our brains have fallen out."[14] Maybe, this is actually the greatest function of "classic" social theory: it helps us to keep our brains in place. That is precisely what people – social scientists in the first place – need most when they are confronted with multiple, complex, constantly shifting and altering social problems.

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12 See for this episode David Kettler, *Marxismus und Kultur. Mannheim und Lukács in den ungarischen Revolutionen 1918/19*, Neuwied–Berlin, 1967.

13 See next to his *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction*, 1940 in particular Karl Mannheim, *Diagnosis of Our Time. Wartime Essays of a Sociologist*, London, 1943.

14 Richard Rorty, "On Ethnocentrism: A Reply to Clifford Geertz", in his: *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, Cambridge–New York, 1991, p. 203.
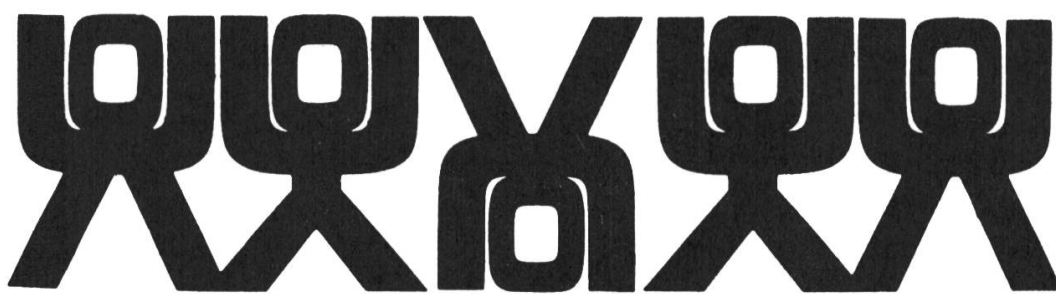
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