PATRONS AS BROKERS

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WHAT IS PATRONAGE?

Two oversimplifications, I believe, are hampering our understanding of patronage. The first is a tendency to view patronage as merely an attribute of a system of social stratification. The second is to use it as a blanket term to cover several conceptually distinct operations. Wertheim is guilty of the first (Wertheim 1968), and most of those who have written about patronage (Mayer is an exception), including myself, have been guilty of the second.

Patronage is the use of resources by a person — the patron — to assist or protect some other person — his client — who does not control such resources. The difference between patron and client thus implies a difference in control over resources, thus a difference in power. Differential access to resources, however, need not imply social stratification, unless stratification is defined purely in terms of power. It is true that in many relatively stable societies power in one field may, over time, be converted into power in several fields, thus furnishing other attributes of high social status, and hence the prerequisites for entrance to higher social strata. In such societies a patron may be a member of the highest stratum. It is, however, equally possible to envisage a situation in which considerable power is wielded by persons who are not members of the upper strata. Sicily is such a society. There persons — *mafiosi* — wield great power but are not always members of the upper stratum, whether local or regional, though it is fair to say that they aspire to membership in it. To gain entrance to it, however, they must convert power into higher social status.

It is consequently slightly misleading to begin an analysis of patronage by viewing it as a ‘structural principle discernible in any traditional society with a more or less pronounced social stratification’ (Wertheim 1968: 1). This leads to regarding patron-client ties as ties exclusively between social superiors — members of a higher social stratum — and social inferiors — members of a lower stratum. Patron-client ties are in fact ties between those who command more resources and those who command less. This difference in power may or may not coincide with differential placement in a system of social stratification. Differences in the control over resources occur in all societies. Patronage must thus be studied as a universal phenomenon, and not something peculiar to traditional societies ‘with a more or less pronounced social stratification’.

It would seem therefore that the relevant questions are not where and why patronage occurs (since patronage occurs in all societies), but how
patrons and clients operate their roles and what factors influence their operation. Given that this is a universal phenomenon, our object should be to arrive at meaningful hypotheses regarding the relation between strategy, resources and environment. These hypotheses, of course, must be tested cross-culturally. But before we can formulate hypotheses of this order we must first understand more about the way patronage operates. It is to this second, more modest, theoretical task, that the discussion in this paper is directed.

**PATRONAGE AND BROKERAGE**

The resources which a patron controls are of two types. The first are those such as land, work, scholarship funds, which he controls directly. The second are strategic contacts with other people who control such resources directly. The former I call first order resources; the latter second order resources. In the past I have viewed the dispensing of both types of resources as patronage (Boissevain 1966). Here I should like to follow Adrian Mayer's lead (Mayer 1963, 1966 and 1967) and distinguish between the two. Mayer calls the dispensing of what I call first order resources patronage, the dispensing of second order resources brokerage. If this distinction is rigorously applied it is apparent that all patrons are also brokers, but not all brokers are patrons. That is, all patrons are called on by their clients to contact others on their behalf; but not all brokers control first order resources. It is safe to say that the aim of all brokers is at some stage to be able to convert some of their resources into first order resources.

I should now like to explore the mechanics of brokerage by trying to answer two questions: What do brokers do? and How do brokers make a profit?

**WHAT DO BROKERS DO?**

The short answer to this question is that a social broker places people in touch with each other either directly or indirectly for profit. He bridges gaps in communication between persons, groups, structures and even cultures. A broker is then a professional manipulator of people and information to bring about communication. He thus occupies a strategic place in a network of social relations viewed as a communication network. It is therefore quite legitimate to look to communication theory to see if it provides analytical models which can help anthropologists ask relevant questions about the operations of brokers.

Communication theorists have reduced a communication system to five fundamental elements (Weaver 1949):

![Communication System Diagram](image)
The information source selects the message to be sent. The transmitter changes this into a signal which is sent via a communication channel to the receiver and thence delivered to destination.

According to communication theorists, the important questions to ask about a communication system have to do with the amount of information, the capacity of the channel, the coding process used to change a message into a signal, and the effects of noise (interference). To these I think anthropologists must add one more: the tariff charged for transmission. The simplest illustration of this model is to isolate the steps involved in sending a telegram. (1) You formulate a message and pass it on to (2) an employee of the telegraph company. He checks it and calculates the tariff according to the number of words, the destination and the channel to be used. If your credit is good you can pay later, if not you pay cash. He then passes the message on to another, who codes it and transmits it via (3) radio waves. It is then (4) received, decoded and delivered to (5) the destination. If the noise has been minimal — and this is a function partly of the channel used, the message and the coding techniques, all of which are also dependent upon the tariff — the message arrives as given by the information source.

Most of the communication transactions an anthropologist encounters are considerably more complicated than this example, but the processes involved are similar enough so that the model and the related questions apply. Take the case of my Sicilian friend Salvatore from Syracuse, who wished to obtain a personal introduction to his professor at the University of Palermo in order to resolve an irregularity in connexion with his thesis (it was registered too late). He selected a person from his network, Avvocato Leonardo, the secretary of the Christian Democratic Party in another town, who he knew had many contacts in Palermo. He had credit with Leonardo, for he had helped the latter prepare a report on the development problems of his town for the provincial party office. Leonardo agreed to help. He scribbled an introduction on the back of his visiting card, introducing Salvatore as his carissimo amico, his dear friend, and sent him along to see his first cousin in Palermo, who worked in a government office. The cousin could not help, but he passed Salvatore to his brother who he said knew many people in the university. The brother was able to introduce him to the professor's assistant. Two days and four links after he started out along this network path, he met the professor. In return for Salvatore's promise to use his own network to recruit votes, the politically ambitious professor agreed to overlook the irregularities connected with the thesis (Boissevain 1966a en 1966b).

Analysis. Information source Salvatore had to get a message to his professor. His own direct channels to Palermo were not suitable. He thus selected a powerful transmitter whom he knew controlled a variety of channels into Palermo. Leonardo, the broker, is of course the transmitter. The channels he controls are role relations embedded in his personal network. In a simple model, the transmitter (broker), is in direct contact with the destination. The communication system is thus reduced to but two role relations source-broker and broker-destination. The broker then functions as coder, transmitter, channel, decoder, receiver, delivering the message personally to the destination.
Our Sicilian case, like most things Sicilian, is a good deal more complex. Leonardo selected a strategic channel capable of carrying this searching type message along a communication path the links of which were not known beyond the first one. Of the many channels he could use, he selected his first cousin, for that role relation was a channel of high capacity and low tariff. Moreover, his credit with his cousin was extremely high, owing to the variety of role relations he shared with him. For the same reason this channel was multipurpose — capable of carrying messages of various types. Some of the channels Leonardo controlled, notably through the Christian Democratic Party apparatus, were used almost exclusively for high tariff political messages. It would thus have been uneconomical to use these channels for this message. Moreover, because of the low political content of Salvatore’s message, it might have been seriously affected by noise had he selected a political channel.

After selecting the channel, Leonardo coded the message by scribbling an introduction on the back of his visiting card. The code used of course depends upon the channel, the message, and, last but not least, the tariff and the credit rating of the transmitter. Leonardo transmitted the message by sending Salvatore, with his introduction, to see his cousin. The latter acted as a relay, receiving, decoding, selecting a new channel, recoding and transmitting to the next link in the path, who acted similarly. The willingness of a broker to act swiftly as a relay for a message sent by another broker is a reflection of the high credit rating of the initial transmitter or the anticipated tariff. The credit relations between the various kinsmen in the communication path were excellent; and the professor’s assistant hoped to book a profit much later, when his professor was elected. Until then, like a good, loyal university assistant (the European professor-assistant relation is a textbook example of a patron-client relation), he tried to help his patron in every way conceivable.

Obviously there are several important differences when this case is compared to the sending of a telegram. To begin with, the channels are role relations, and not radio waves. These are not constant and messages sent are subject to much noise. Role relations are very much affected by the number of messages sent and received as well as the tariff exchanged. One person, Leonardo, performed a complex series of operations which it took several persons to do in the case of sending a telegram (selecting and providing the channel, coding, transmitting). Moreover, he furnished access to a series of relays which ultimately guided the message to its destination. This complete service is what gives a good broker his power. Another difference is that the tariff in all the transactions was not cash but past or future services. Salvatore had in fact paid in advance. A final and obvious difference is that the information source himself moved along the channels, thus reducing noise. This is something not possible in a telegraphic communication system (though the sung congratulatory telegram does add a dimension in this direction!).

There are, however, also a number of important similarities. To my mind the most striking is that the tariff varies according to the message, destination and channels used. Secondly, the ability to send effectively (with little noise) depends upon having access to select channels. Finally, the ability to send
messages rapidly as well as the number and capacity of the channels, varies
directly with the credit rating of the broker.

It is now time to ask how the broker manages his business and how he makes
a profit.

HOW DO BROKERS MAKE A PROFIT?

Brokerage is a business. A broker's *capital* consists of his personal network of
relations with people; in brief, his communication channels. As noted, these
are role relations. All role relations are governed by the notion of reciprocity
or *transaction*: 'where parties in the course of their interactions systematically
try to assure that the value gained for them is greater or equal to the value
lost' (Barth 1967: 4). Interaction must thus be seen as a strategic game with
each party trying to gain value or at least break even. This value I call *tariff*.

Whether a person makes a profit very much depends on the tariff charged by
the other parties in the transaction, as well as other social costs, and, ulti­
mately, on the interest he is able to exact. The tariff is rarely specified and
normally paid later.

What is *tariff*? It is the value which the broker derives from the transaction.
This can consist of services, information, status, good will, even psychological
satisfaction. Only rarely does it consist of money, for reasons which will
become clearer below. The fee for Leonardo's services as broker was Sal­
vatore's help with the development report. Salvatore's expertise in this
field must of course be viewed as a first order resource (capital) which he
controlled. Salvatore's *fee* for his service was the message Leonardo sent.

This tariff, of course, had not been specified when the transaction was begun.
Both felt that they had made a profit.

*Tariff*, however, is rarely paid at the moment of transaction. Rather, a social
transaction is not usually a simultaneous exchange of services. More usually
there is a considerable time lag between exchanges: 'Communicate now and
pay later' or 'Pay now and communicate later' are the slogans that govern
transactions of brokers. They are statements about credit.

If a broker's capital consists of the actual communication channels he con­
trols, his *credit* consists of what others *think* his capital to be (Bailey 1969).

They are thus dealing in expectations — future possible services — rather
than dead certainties. Social brokers of the type discussed here operate
exclusively with credit. The tariff is rarely specified; it is left as an understand­
ing that something will be exchanged at a later date. If it were specified
and promptly paid in full, as is so easy to do with a monetary transaction, the
account would be closed out and there would be no special (debt) relation
between the transactors. It is in the interest of both parties to keep the channel
open, either by underpaying or overpaying at a later date. The strategy is to
avoid specifying the tariff.

*Debt* is of course a function of credit, for it is its reciprocal. It is a statement
of credit, for it is proof that the creditor has faith in the ability of the debtor
to provide services. Thus to be in debt is a demonstration of credit — as any
one accustomed to paying in cash discovers when he tries to establish a credit
rating to get a loan. (In Canada I discovered because I had no debts I had no
credit rating, and without a credit rating I found it difficult to obtain goods on credit when I needed to!) It is often said ‘Tell me who your friends are that I may tell you who you are’. Equally one can say ‘Tell me who your debtors are that I may judge your credit’.

Because one is never quite sure of the extent of a broker’s capital (who and how good his contacts are), it is easier for him to increase his credit than for someone whose capital consists exclusively of first order resources. These latter are more easily observed and, moreover, are finite, whereas the network of a broker is open ended, thus potentially infinite. The credit of a patron is thus more limited than that of the broker.¹

The broker thus provides communication services and tries to land people in debt, thereby increasing his own credit, for each debt is an open communication channel or return service. There is of course a considerable risk involved that people will not reciprocate as expected. That is, that they will default. After his credit is well established, people offer him their services, thus establishing credit with him. This is an investment in the future. Salvatore willingly provided services to Leonardo because he knew Leonardo had a range of excellent contacts that, one day, might be useful. Thus by controlling second order resources, Leonardo was able to gain access to first order resources which he used for his own benefit (to increase his use to his party, thereby increasing his credit with strategic political brokers). Thus ability to bring about communication rapidly and efficiently is in large measure determined by credit, and credit is naturally dependent upon ability to bring about communication. It is a cumulative process.

The profit a broker derives from his activities stems from two sources. The first is interest; the second his capacity to convert his capital and credit (his network and the faith people have in his ability to use it for or against them) into other resources.

As interest I regard, not the return service, which I see as the fee, but the possibility of deciding just when just what will be offered as a return service. It is this flexibility in transaction which gives the broker his high credit: people can be led to think all sorts of things about the nature of his network and his ability to manipulate it. With the patron they can come to know its limits much more quickly.

Second order resources can very often be converted into first order resources: property, political office, better employment.² Conversion thus broadens the power base of the broker: it enables him to dispense first order resources to clients. But conversion is tricky, for by becoming a patron, the broker becomes unequivocally tied to his promises to make his first order resources available: to dispense. Unless he is able to dispense these to his clients, his

¹ Mayer (1967) notes that a political leader can recruit a greater following by playing the role of broker rather than that of patron. By being a broker he deals in promises to consult others who control the first order resources his followers desire. As patron he has to dispense first order resources. His support is thus limited by the extent of first order resources he can dispense.

² For a discussion of the conversion problems of entrepreneurs — and brokers may certainly be regarded as such — see introduction and articles in Barth 1963.

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credit diminishes rapidly, for he is now no longer able to deal in futures and probabilities, which are the stock in trade of the broker. Once his credit as a patron is placed in jeopardy, his credit as a broker is affected as well. As escalation of credit is cumulative, so is de-escalation. Leonardo, an admirable broker with high credit, sought to convert his credit as a broker into political capital. His credit within the local section of the Christian Democratic Party, bolstered by promises to strategic figures, gave him enough support to become mayor of his town (Boissevain 1966b, 230-231). But his resources as mayor were limited — in Sicily a mayor has power, but less than people assume. He was not able to dispense the first order resources (jobs and contracts) that his clients expected. He began to lose credit. Within a year he was unseated as mayor, and shortly after that, his credit in ever more rapid decline, was ousted from his strategic post as secretary of the party. This loss closed down a whole network of strategic communication channels. But when his credit as broker was gone, he was able to retire from the local arena to an excellent teaching post he had finally secured in Naples, after much intrigue, before his credit collapsed. Though bankrupt as a broker, by astute conversion of his second order resources into first order economic resources, he was able in the end to achieve his goal, the security of a good government job.

The moral to his little Sicilian episode seems to be that if a broker does decide to convert his assets (capital and credit), he should think twice about converting them to political resources. Slow conversion to economic resources would seem safer, though the profit may not be as great or as rapid.3

SUMMARY

I began by viewing patronage as a universal phenomenon and suggested that it was time we explored more intensively the way patrons operate their roles. The distinction between patrons and brokers is relevant in this respect. Patrons are persons who use first order resources which they control (land, jobs, wealth) to protect and assist their clients. Brokers are those who use second order resources (role relations with other persons who control first order resources) to the same end. By examining brokerage in terms of a communication system, a number of relevant questions are suggested. These include the type and number of messages a broker sends, the number and capacity of the channels he controls, the codes he uses, the numbers of relays he can activate.

Brokerage must also be examined as a business enterprise. A broker's credit is a key asset with which he can actually increase his capital. This consideration indicates a further set of questions that should be asked of a broker: what is his credit rating, what is the nature of his debts and credits, and who are his creditors and debtors? What are his tariff scales?

3 Paine has pointed out, however, that the conversion of second order resources into first order resources can also be fraught with problems (Paine 1963).
What conversions has he attempted and with what success? What types of conversion are possible? A brief examination of one attempt to convert second order into first order resources indicated that conversion is hazardous and may lead to a downward spiral of credit. All in all it would appear that it is analytically desirable to distinguish operationally between patrons and brokers. Many of the questions asked about brokers can be asked about patrons. When more is learned about the way patrons and brokers operate their roles, systematic studies must be made of the way environmental factors influence their enterprises. In short, there is still much that remains to be done in analyzing patronage and brokerage.

REFERENCES CITED