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The Cambridge Handbook of Sociology

Volume 1

Core Areas in Sociology and the Development of the Discipline

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Part V

SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND THE ORGANIZATION OF SOCIETY

CHAPTER 20

Sociological Perspectives on Social Structure

Daniel Little

One mark of modernity is the fact that we swim in a sea of *structures* – states, markets, militaries, employment systems, social networks, taxation systems, and systems of racial and gender disadvantage, to name several. In place of a perhaps mythical premodern society in which social life was mediated by personal relationships, the modern world is mediated by structures, institutions, and systems of impersonal rules. The concept of social structure plays a key role in sociological theory and explanation, but its use is sometimes unclear.

Several core ideas lie at the root of most contemporary sociologists' understanding of the concept of social structure – even for critics of the concept. Structures are social entities. Structures include such things as corporations, municipal governments, organized crime networks, and military organizations. Structures have enduring properties that are largely independent of the individuals whom they encompass. A social structure is effective in organizing behavior of large numbers of actors. A structure is coercive of individual and group behavior. A structure consists of rules, institutions, and practices. A structure is socially embodied in the actions, thoughts, beliefs, and durable dispositions of individual human beings. A structure assigns roles and powers to individual actors. A structure often has distributive consequences for power and resources assigned to individuals and groups. A social structure is geographically dispersed. Structures are things with sufficient fixity over time to permit them to be regarded as social entities.

Many sociologists agree on the basic point that social structures exist with reasonably stable properties and that they influence the behavior of individuals. Examples include the government of the state of New York, the system of labor organization and representation in the United States, and the vertically organized corporation. In each case the social entity consists of a set of roles, regulations, and actors, along with a set of physical and financial resources, that confront the citizens and consumers who interact with them as objective realities. Real estate developers go to the appropriate agencies for permits and conform to the requirements of state law and state and

local inspectors. Criminals conform to the requirements of their organizations as well. Institutions and organizations regulate and constrain the lives of individuals.

Many sociologists also recognize that structures are plastic and malleable to some degree (Perrow 2002). Structures and institutions are the result of human social activity and strategic interaction, and their specific arrangements are subject to contention and reform. The "entropic" forces that should be expected to push organizations toward incessant change are fairly evident. Most evidently, individuals in strategic positions within an organization often have interests that are well served by adapting, reconceptualizing, or disregarding the rules. Michel Crozier makes this point in his analysis of organizations as strategic sites (Crozier and Friedberg 1980). More recently Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam have focused attention on organizations as "strategic action fields" (Fligstein and McAdam 2012). Zygmunt Bauman makes this point in a particularly provocative way by insisting the social world is "liquid" (Bauman 2000). He emphasizes the fact of change within society, and he argues that change is occurring more and more rapidly in the modern world. The metaphor of a liquid society overstates the case since many structures have significantly more stability than the image of liquidity implies; but the fundamental notion that social structures and other entities are subject to change is certainly a valid one. We can observe the drift in the functioning and roles of institutions in every aspect of life – political, economic, educational, and ideological.

It is evident that structures are populated and constituted by individuals. So whatever causal powers the structures may have and whatever persistent features they possess must somehow be embodied in the actions and states of mind of those individuals. This is the grain of truth in the various versions of methodological individualism and analytical sociology (Hedström 2005): individuals constitute higher-level social entities and forces through their actions. Structures rest upon micro-foundations (Little 1998). The effects of a structure on individuals and other social entities and processes depend on the coordinated actions of individuals within the structure. Individual actions within the structure are constrained by the meanings, rules, and enforcement mechanisms that exist within the structure. External individual actions and social arrangements are affected by the knowledge and representations that these external players have of the workings of the structure. And there must be specific processes of inculcation, coordination, and enforcement through which the required forms of action transpire at the level of the actors.

Several fundamental kinds of questions must be answered when we contemplate the idea of structures and organizations possessing persistent properties over time. First is the question of the conformant behavior of role players within the organization at various points of time. Why do participants behave as the structure or institution demands? What are the micro-foundations of compliance? Individuals do not conform simply because the employee handbook specifies that they should. Rather, they need to be incentivized, trained, motivated, supervised, and disciplined in order to bring about the forms of orderly behavior that the organization requires. And this means that an organization depends on the existence of roles presenting incentives and constraints for supervisors and trainers as well. This is the focus of a great deal of work by researchers within the field of new institutionalism (Brinton and Nee 1998; Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Thornton et al. 2012).

Second is a larger question of accounting for the stability of the rules and roles themselves. It was noted above that structures are malleable in response to the strategic actions of actors. So a large question for the theory of structures and organizations is that of stability. What are the features of an organization in an environment that lends stability to its current constitution? What factors work against entropy and the conflicting interests of various internal actors, each of which tends to undermine the

stability of the rules and roles? Are there forms of weak homeostasis that work to restore a social structure in face of minor deviations?

The causal processes linking institution and individuals appear to be fully two-directional, with reinforcing feedback loops. The institution consists of a set of rules, processes, and role players. The rules are both formal (laws, standard practice guides, by-laws) and informal (long-standing and widely recognized practices and norms governing specific kinds of activity). Some of the role players have the role of enforcing the rules and incentivizing the desired behaviors. These "enforcers" may act on the basis of a range of levels of understanding and commitment; so enforcement itself is variable. Ordinary participants within the institution are subject to the incentives and sanctions created by the rules and the enforcers, so their behavior is to some extent responsive to the rules. And ordinary participants in turn have internalized some understanding of the core processes and regulations of the institution – and are (in varying degrees of involvement) prepared to encourage or sanction the behavior of their peers based on their understanding of the rules.

James Coleman examines the micro-foundations of social stuctures in his landmark book, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Coleman 1990). Coleman advocates for a view of the social world that emphasizes the actions of the situated individual, and he pays virtually no attention to the idea of persistent social structures within which actors make choices. His focus is on the relations among actors and the higher-level patterns that arise from these relations. He doubts the existence of higher-level structures, and he argues that we should better understand a "structure" as a pattern of purposive interaction among individual agents. He emphasizes the idea of the interdependency of the actions and choices of a number of actors. "The constructed social environment does not grow naturally through the interests of actors who are parties to relations. Each relation must be constructed by an outsider, and each relation is viable only through its connections to other relations that are part of the same organization … The structure is like a house of cards, with extensive interdependence among the different relations of which it is composed" (Coleman 1990: 43–44). This is a fascinating formulation. Essentially Coleman is offering a sketch of how we might conceive of a social ontology that accounts for the macro-level properties of structures. We are advised to think of social structures and norms as coordinated and mutually reinforcing patterns of individual behavior. The emphasis is on individual behavior within the context of the actions of others. As he puts the point later in the book: "The elementary actor is the wellspring of action, no matter how complex are the structures through which action takes place" (Coleman 1990: 503). Whether or not we accept Coleman's skepticism about the existence of structures, his work provides a powerful effort to answer the question of how the micro-foundations work at the level of actors.

It is readily noticed that social structures have distributive consequences that often create features of stratification and differentiation of various social characteristics of individuals – age, race, income, social opportunities, economic inequalities, and so on. Sociologists are often interested in the patterns of inequality that emerge in the societies they study, and they seek to explain those inequalities in terms of the workings of the basic institutions and structures through which individuals achieve opportunities and outcomes. Distributional characteristics in society are outcomes of the workings of basic structures of economy and politics, as well as of gender, race, and ethnicity.

A dichotomy that spans many of the social sciences is the opposition of structure versus agency. "Structures" are said to be the objective complexes of social institutions within which people live and act. "Agents" are said to be human deliberators and choosers who navigate their life plans in an environment of constraints. If structure and agent are considered to be

ontologically distinct levels, then we have a series of difficult questions to confront. Which has causal priority? Are structures determinative of social outcomes, with agents merely playing their roles within these structures? Or are agents the drivers of social causation, and are structures merely secondary effects of individual-level actions and states of consciousness? Are features of structures reducible or explicable in terms of the actions and characteristics of individuals? Or, possibly, are the behavioral characteristics of individuals merely the consequence of the social structures they inhabit? Sociologists like Anthony Giddens and Margaret Archer have argued that the question is misleading, and that neither structure nor actor has exclusive primacy.

Anthony Giddens attempts to dissolve the agent-structure dilemma by arguing that the two poles are inseparable (Giddens 1979). He argues that neither individualists nor structuralists have succeeded in expressing the inherent interdependence of the two poles. Give primacy to structures and the agents are "dopes" – robots controlled by structural conditions. Give primacy to individuals, and structures and institutions seem to disappear. Giddens's own view is that the two poles of structure and agency must be considered from within a common formulation (Giddens 1979: 53). He emphasizes the fact of process rather than static organization in his theory of structures; to capture the dynamic nature of a set of human processes, he prefers the language of "structuration" rather than "structuralism."

Critical Realism and Social Structure

Critical realism has become an important topic within sociological theory, and this theory has direct relevance to the idea of social structures. This approach to the philosophy of science originated with the philosophical writings of Roy Bhaskar in *A Realist Theory of Science* (Bhaskar 1975), *The Possibility of Naturalism* (Bhaskar 1989), and several other books. According to critical realism, things (objects) possess powers, and we explain the behavior of objects (and ensembles) as a consequence of the operation of their powers. Critical realism depends upon a philosophical model of argument, transcendental reasoning, and it is advanced as a fundamental critique of the Humean understanding of the nature of empirical knowledge. In the social realm, this view is applied to social entities like social structures. Bhaskar argues that social structures have causal properties that are emergent from the properties of the individuals who constitute the structure.

Tuukka Kaidesoja provides an important friendly critique of Bhaskar's philosophical method in *Naturalizing Critical Realist Social Ontology* (Kaidesoja 2013). Kaidesoja's critique is intended to improve the plausibility of the argument by replacing *a priori* philosophical arguments with naturalized scientific arguments. For Kaidesoja, the hope of discovering fundamental truths through transcendental reasoning is illusory, and he advocates instead for a strategy of "naturalizing" the arguments for critical realism. Kaidesoja agrees with Bhaskar about the importance of ontological theory, and he thinks these topics are important for practitioners of the social sciences as well as philosophers. Kaidesoja argues against Bhaskar's aprioristic strategy and puts forward an alternative: "naturalized critical realist social ontology," a view that places ontological reasoning within the domain of ordinary empirical scientific reasoning (see Somers 1998, Gorski 2013, and Steinmetz 1998 for important treatments of critical realism by several American comparative-historical sociologists, and see Groff and Greco 2013 and Mumford and Anjum 2011 for recent philosophical arguments in favor of causal powers).

Margaret Archer's work addresses several topics of interest to the subject of the ontology of the social realm, including especially the agent-structure dichotomy and the reality of social structures. Archer takes issue with the most fundamental aspect of Giddens's view, his argument that agents and structures are conceptually inseparable. Archer argues instead for a form of

"dualism" about agents and structures – that each pole needs to be treated separately and in its own terms. She acknowledges, of course, that social structures depend on the individuals who make them up, but she does not believe that this basic fact tells us anything about how to analyze or explain facts about either agents or structures. "Social reality is unlike any other because of its human constitution. It is different from natural reality whose defining feature is self-subsistence: for its existence does not depend upon us, a fact which is not compromised by our human ability to intervene in the world of nature and change it" (Archer 1995: 1).

Archer argues that the two primary approaches that theorists have taken to the social world – methodological individualism and methodological holism – are fundamentally inadequate. They represent what she calls upward and downward conflation. In the first case, "society" disappears and is replaced by some notion of aggregated individual action; in the second case "agents" disappear and the human individuals do no more than act out the imperatives of social norms and structures. She associates the first view with J. S. Mill (Mill 1879) and Max Weber (Weber 1968[1922]) and the second view with Durkheim (Durkheim 1964[1895]; Marx 1904). In her view, agents and structures are distinct, and neither is primary over the other.

Archer's central notion is the idea of morphogenesis. This is the idea that processes of change occur for agents and social structures in interlocking and temporally complex ways. Here is how she explains this concept: "The 'morpho' element is an acknowledgement that society has no pre-set form or preferred state: the 'genetic' part is a recognition that it takes its shape from, and is formed by, agents, originating from the intended and unintended consequences of their activities" (Archer 1995: 5). Morphogenesis applies at all levels, from "the capitalist system" to "the firm" to "the actor" to personal identity and motivation. And she believes that properties at various levels – micro and macro – have a degree of autonomy from each other, which she refers to as "emergence."

Agents are formed within a set of social structures – norms, language communities, power relationships. The genesis of the agent occurs within the context of these structures. On a larger time scale, the structures themselves change as a result of the activities and choices of the historically situated individuals who make them up. She summarizes this ontology as a set of cycles with different time frames: structural conditioning = > social interaction = > structural elaboration (Archer 1995: 16). This notion leads Archer to a conception of the social and the actor that reflects a fundamentally historical understanding of social processes. Formation and transformation are the central metaphors (Archer 1995: 154).

A recent and unapologetic treatment of the reality of social structures is presented in the work of another researcher within the field of critical realism, Dave Elder-Vass's *The Causal Power of Social Structures* (Elder-Vass 2010). Elder-Vass accepts the point that agency and structure are inseparable; neither functions as a solely sufficient cause of social outcomes. But he argues that social structures have causal powers that are not reducible to facts about individuals. He relies heavily on the theory of supervenience to solve the riddle of how structures can be composed of individual-level activity and yet possess autonomous causal powers. According to this concept, properties and interactions at the lower-level fix the properties of the higher level, while leaving it open that the properties at the higher level can be used independently in scientific theories without reduction to the lower-level concepts. Jaegwon Kim summarizes the supervenience relation of X upon Y as specifying that there can be no difference in X without some difference in the states of Y (Kim 1993; 2005).

Elder-Vass rejects the ontology of methodological individualism, which he regards as a species of reductionism: social properties need to be reducible to features of individuals. And yet he fully and

unambiguously embraces the obvious fact that social structures must be **composed** of individuals in relations to each other. His way out of this apparent contradiction is to argue that social structures possess **emergent** causal powers: causal characteristics that pertain to the whole but not to the parts or their ensembles. Here is how he characterizes emergence. "A thing … can have properties or capabilities that are not possessed by its parts. Such properties are called emergent properties" (Elder-Vass 2010: 4).

So this is Elder-Vass's core ontology of structures: structures are composed of individuals in relation to each other; structures have "emergent" causal powers that are not simply the sum of the causal powers of the component individuals; and these emergent powers derive from the relations between the components (see Poe Yu-ze Wan's "Emergence a la Systems Theory: Epistemological *Totalausschluss* or Ontological Novelty?" for a helpful clarification for these questions about emergence (Wan 2011a; 2011b).) Wan distinguishes between two schools of thought about emergence, associated with Niklas Luhmann (Luhmann et al. 2013) and Mario Bunge (Bunge 2003).

Society and Structure

So far, we have examined the idea that structures are components of society. A broader meaning associated with "structure" is the idea that society *possesses* a structure of interconnected parts and sub-systems, and that the parts influence each other in systematic ways. To outline the structure of society is to provide a theory of how it works as a system.

This usage is illustrated in Marx's extended concept of the capitalist mode of production, in which various large elements – technology and production, distribution, wage labor, property ownership, political authority, culture, and ideology – are interconnected in functional ways. Putting his idea crudely, the economic structure is a system of power and authority through which value and surplus value are created through productive labor, and are transferred from producers to capitalists. The system of law exists to secure the system of property through which this economic activity takes place. And morality, ideology, and culture exist to secure the legitimacy of the relations of power and authority embodied in the economic and political structure. Marx describes this system as one consisting of a base (forces and relations of production) and superstructure (state, ideology, culture), with the workings of class interest serving as the engine of stability and change. So Marx looks at capitalism as a system. The heart of this view is expressed in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*: "In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces" (Marx 1904: 11).

Here and elsewhere, Marx picks out the forces of production and relations of production as the basic determinants of social change. The mode of production represents a complex and objective reality to which individuals must adapt in their behaviors.

This is a thoroughly structural understanding of the workings of capitalist society. These ideas became central in the writings of Louis Althusser (Althusser and Balibar 1970), whose work in turn inspired further theorizing in the 1970s. Hindess and Hirst (1975) applied Althusser's thinking to earlier modes of production (feudalism and classical slavery). Nicos Poulantzas attempted to give the structuralist theory of the capitalist system greater specificity in *Political Power and Social Classes* (Poulantzas 1978). His approach emphasized the idea of "determination in the last instance."

> *By mode of production we shall designate not what is generally marked out as the economic (i.e. relations of production in the strict sense), but a specific combination of*

various structures and practices which, in combination, appear as so many instances or levels, i.e. as so many regional structures of this mode (Poulantzas 1978: 13–14).

Race, Gender, and Class

Let us close by considering the status of some of the large features of society to which sociologists give a great deal of attention: race, gender, and class. Is "race" a structure in American society? Plainly it possesses some of the key elements identified in the concept of social structure. The Jim Crow system was a coercive structure that governed the behavior of white and black Americans, and most observers would agree that American society continues to embody a set of institutions that assign different roles, opportunities, and powers to people according to their race (or gender or class). The social relations governing race lead to an uneven distribution of opportunities and outcomes, so "race" is a social fact with important consequences. It has the element of coercion: racial prejudice and patterns of discrimination are imposed on individuals without an "opt-out" possibility. And we can identify many of the social mechanisms through which race and racial discrimination work; so the category possesses microfoundations. Today many of those mechanisms are "informal" rather than "formal"; but, of course, the legal institutionalization of racial discrimination is a recent fact in American history. Further, many kinds of stratification emerge as a result of the system of race in America: residential segregation, wage and wealth differentials, educational gaps, employment levels, and racial health disparities (Massey and Denton 1993; Massey 2007). So "race" is indeed a structural feature of American society in both primary senses of the term. One could make similar arguments about the persisting importance within contemporary institutions of facts about class (Burawoy 1979; 1985), gender (Mohanty 2003; Wetherell and Mohanty 2010), and ethnicity (Frank et al. 2010) as well.

Conclusion

Social structures are real causal entities that have real effects on the actions and identities of individuals, and social structures are constituted and embodied in the actions, ideas, and relationships of living human beings. Both statements are true, and the tension between them continues to stimulate a great deal of fruitful contemporary inquiry in sociological theory and empirical research. What are the microfoundations of social structures and their causal powers? What are the specific social pathways through which individuals at a time and place come to have the beliefs and mental frameworks that support the workings of a structure or institution? Through what social mechanisms do structures and institutions impose constraints on individuals? Questions like these have proven productive for sociologists and philosophers as diverse as Margaret Archer, Dave Elder-Vass, and Kathleen Thelen. The ideas of structuration (Giddens), morphogenesis (Archer), and agental interdependence (Coleman) serve well to provide an alternative frame to the static idea of the structure-agent problem. Social structures play crucial roles in sociological explanations, from explanations of racial health disparities to explanations of the failure of safety regulatory organizations to explanations of rural-to-urban migration, and recent theorizing about the ontology of social structures provides confidence that these uses of the concept can be justified within a coherent meta-theory for sociology.

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