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THE SOCIOLOGY OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE

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In the most general sense, the notion of "structure" refers to a set of relations between elements that has some measure of coherence and stability. It is, then, a concept with a heavy load of abstraction, a concept that we could, in principle, apply to any parcel of reality where we perceive a certain order. The way it is commonly used in the social sciences, it simply designates the deepest, most recurrent aspects of social reality, its framework or underlying form. In this sense, it is often used to distinguish the fundamental elements of society from the secondary ones, the essential aspects from the superfluous ones, the stable ones from the contingent ones (Boudon 1968). The idea of social structure refers, in this general case, to the idea of an ordered or organized arrangement of elements (Smelser 1992). On other occasions, the structure of a social aggregate is equivalent to the distribution of its elements in given positions. Sometimes the structure of a social entity is simply identified with its form or shape.

As the previous paragraph suggests, the meaning of the term *social structure* is not free from ambiguity. Adapting a famous joke of Raymond Aron's (1971) on the heterogeneity of the approaches of sociology, we could say that the only thing that the sociologists who deal with social structure share is that they all acknowledge how hard it is to define social structure. But the reference to Aron's joke may be more than just an analogy. Due to the importance of the concept of social structure in sociology, its definitions end up reflecting the plurality and heterogeneity of

approaches that characterize the discipline. As the late Robert Merton aptly said (1976:32), the evolving notion of social structure is not only polyphyletic—because it has more that one ancestral line of sociological thought—but also polymorphous—because these lines differ partly in substance and partly in method.

Where does this semantic ambiguity that envelopes the term *social structure* come from? The Latin source of the word *structure* is *struere,* which means "to build." And the most general notion of this term does, in fact, refer to the framework of elements and materials that constitute and support a building (López and Scott 2000). Another relevant and more recent (nineteenth century) historical source of meaning for the term *structure* comes from the anatomy of living beings, where the term designates the relation of the parts to the organic whole. In his classic work on structuralism, Jean Piaget (1970) went far beyond the constructive and organic analogies to specify three important characteristics that define the idea of structure in a great variety of scientific fields and disciplines. Every structure is, first, a *totality* whose properties cannot be reduced to those of its constituent elements. Second, it is a *system* with its own laws or mechanisms for functioning. And third, it is a *self-regulated entity* that to some degree maintains itself or preserves itself throughout time. These characteristics that Piaget pointed out have, in one way or another, impregnated the meaning of the concept structure in the social sciences and, more specifically, the use of the

term *social structure* in sociology. As we will see, however, this Piagetian minimum common denominator has not been enough to produce a paradigmatic consensus on the concept of social structure. In addition, the contributions from neighboring disciplines have not always facilitated the task of achieving this paradigmatic consensus. The use of the idea of social structure in social anthropology, where it moves at very different levels of abstraction (Radcliffe-Brown 1940; Nadel 1957; Lévi-Strauss [1949] 1968) and is oriented toward very diverse empirical referents (e.g., Murdock 1949), is a good illustration of this.

In this chapter, we have three principal objectives. First, we will present two main visions of social structure that correspond to two important currents of structural sociological thought: on one hand the institutional or cultural vision and on the other the relational or positional vision. Both visions try to determine which element of society is the most *structural* one, in the sense of the element that conditions others the most, by answering the following question: What is social structure and what does it consist of? These visions of social structure, although they share some generic traits, can be distinguished because they give analytic priority to certain aspects of the social structures as opposed to others. Deep down, the difference between these visions reflects the discussion about the relationship between the sphere of culture and the sphere of social relations, a discussion that repeats itself throughout the development of sociological theory. Nevertheless, we will discuss some efforts at a theoretical synthesis of the two visions that have arisen. Afterwards, in the rest of the chapter, we will try to organize the debate on the notion of social structure by presenting two key aspects that are clearly interdependent from the analytic point of view but that should be treated separately for the sake of explanatory clarity. The first aspect refers to the definition of the different levels of social structure and the analysis of the relations that hold among them. Here, the relevant question is, How many levels of social structure is it possible to identify and what is their configuration as a whole? (Prendergast and Knottnerus 1994). The second matter has to do with the margins of freedom and creativity left by social structure to individual action, and how individual action tends to modify or reproduce the structure (Sewell 1992; Kontopoulos 1993). The question, in this case, is, What relationship is there between social structure and individual action?[1] We will end the chapter with a summary of the main ideas presented.

VISIONS OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The different approaches to the term *social structure* make it quite clear that there is no basic paradigmatic consensus. To illustrate these relevant differences, we are going to examine two different visions of social structure—the institutional and the relational visions—that, without exhausting the inventory of existing approaches, point to the two main currents in structural sociological thought and, more generally, in sociological theory.

Institutional or Cultural Vision

In the first place, we will consider the *institutional* or *cultural* vision of social structure. From this point of view, the basic elements of social structure are the norms, beliefs, and values that regulate social action. A complete, influential sociological tradition understands social structure to be an *institutional* structure—namely, a set of *cultural* and *normative* models that define actors' expectations about behavior. The structural sociology that favors the ideational contexts of action—for example, norms, beliefs, values—has clear antecedents in the currents of thought that defend some kind of cultural determinism of human behavior. But the idea that the social structure consists of institutions, understood to be cultural phenomena and collective representations that regulate social action, is present above all in the functionalist theorization of the 1940s and 1950s. The clearest and most systematic expression of the relevance of cultural models for understanding the basic structure of social relations can be found in the work of Talcott Parsons. In fact, Parsons (1951) imagined a *social system* made up of differentiated roles that maintained structured (systemic) relations among themselves. Each role is defined in the value system shared by the individuals who form the society, so that the society is ruled by cultural norms that are transmitted from one generation to the next by a process of socialization. Individuals internalize these roles in their infancy: They learn to behave and to relate to others according to these shared cultural models. What we wish to highlight is that the social institutions—namely, the shared norms that reflect the fundamental values of society—constitute the skeleton of the social system (Parsons 1951). As Hamilton (1983) observes, in Parsons's theorization, social structures coincide with the systems of expectations—normative orientations—that regulate the relations between the actors, with the objective of satisfying the society's functional needs. In this approach, society's material structure itself derives from its cultural structure. This means that we can apprehend the basic structure of social relations (from kinship to stratification) from the contents of the culture that the members of the society share.

After a hiatus of almost 20 years, these visions of social structure have reappeared with renewed energy in the current of thought known as neo-institutionalism (Brinton and Nee 1998). The most recent position of the neo-institutionalists, particularly in economics, political science, and the sociology of organizations, is much less ambitious and deterministic than the version of Parsons and his more orthodox followers. In other words, there is no attempt to provide a general explanation of how society functions, nor is the idea that the cultural/value sphere constitutes the ultimate essence of social structure held.

In fact, the neo-institutionalists in economy and political science "limit" themselves to acknowledging the importance of institutions as shared norms and cultural representations that regulate individual action. Institutions function as "game rules" and procedures that give a sense of stability and order to interactions and reduce the insecurity of market transactions. On the other hand, neo-institutionalism in the field of the sociology of organizations has introduced the concept of institutional isomorphism to describe how the emergence of similar structures among previously different organizations is the result of the diffusion of organizational languages and cultures (DiMaggio 1994).

Relational and Distributive Vision

Second, we have the *relational* perspective. From this point of view, the elements that make up social structure are, basically, social relations, and the analysis of social structure focuses on the tissue of social relations that connects individuals, groups, organizations, communities, and societies. With reference to the antecedents of this perspective, we must mention, first of all, the Marxist tradition, which interprets social structure as a system of relations between class positions, with the basic relations being the relations of exploitation of the dominated classes by the dominant classes; these relations are defined by the modes of production of a given society in a particular historical period (Marx [1859] 1936). Authors such as Simmel ([1908] 1950), for whom society exists insofar as individuals enter into association or reciprocal action, should not be forgotten as pioneers of this vision of social structure.

For the sociology of social structure, however, this relational perspective has its nearest origins in British social anthropology. English anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown (1940:2), for example, saw human beings "connected by a complex network of social relations" and used the term *social structure* "to denote this network of actually existing relations." Social structure thus includes both all person-to-person social relations and the differentiation of individuals and of classes by their social role. Of course, contemporary applications of this approach go well beyond the anthropological study of small groups and communities. And, in all probability, the main development in this vein nowadays is modern network analysis, with a really broad range of studies, from personal relationships to kinship, from organizations to markets, from cities to world economy. Modern network (or structural) analysis aims to study "the ordered arrangements of relations that are contingent upon exchange among members of social systems" and claims that social structures "can be represented as *networks*—as sets of *nodes* (or social systems members) and sets of *ties* depicting their interconnections" (Wellman and Berkowitz 1988:3, 4). Network theorists try to map social structures, studying regular and enduring patterns of relation in the organization of social systems and analyzing how these patterns affect the behavior of individual members (see, e.g., Granovetter 2005, for an analysis of the impact of social networks on economics outcomes).

An important variation on this second vision of social structure is the *distributive* or *positional* perspective. From the distributive point of view, social structure is an ordered or hierarchical set of positions. For example, according to Blau (1976b, 1977a, 1977b, 1980, 1994), social structure is defined quantitatively in terms of the distributions of the members of a population in different social positions. In Blau's own words (1976b), social structure refers "to population distributions among social positions along various lines—positions that affect people's role relations and social interaction" (p. 221). A set of parameters—or criteria of social distinction, such as age, sex, race, and socioeconomic status—defines a social structure, which is composed of social positions and social relations. Under these assumptions, Blau's theory essentially deals with two things: (1) establishing the structural conditions of a specific society—namely, defining the quantitative properties of its social structure (e.g., the number of individuals who occupy the different social positions and the size of the different groups and social strata) and (2) analyzing how a society's structural conditions, understood in quantitative terms, affect the models of social interaction or of association (e.g., marriage or friendship) among those who occupy its different social positions. Furthermore, Blau's theory of social structure is not only distributive but also macrostructural and multidimensional. One of the objectives of the social structure theory of Blau (1977b) is to explain certain forms of social inequality. In a similar vein, Lin (2001:33), in his recent work on social capital, defines a social structure as consisting of "(1) a set of social units (*positions*) that possess differential amounts of one or more types of valued resources and that (2) are hierarchically related relative to *authority* (control and access to resources), (3) share certain *rules* and procedures in the use of the resources, and (4) are entrusted to *occupants* (*agents*) who *act on* these rules and procedures."[2]

Some Attempts at Synthesis

A persistent problem in the debate between the cultural vision and the relational vision is that it often leads to a dual representation of the social structure and to a split image of society. In some classic authors, such as Durkheim ([1893] 1964) and Weber ([1921] 1968), and in other contemporary ones, such as Dahrendorf (1972), Giddens (1984), Sewell (1992), and Bourdieu (1989), we can find a broad conception of social structure that attempts to include both the ideational and the relational aspects. Dahrendorf (1972:163) uses the expression "the two faces of social structure" to refer to this idea. According to Dahrendorf (1972:157ff.), the categories of integration and values, on one hand, and the categories of authority and interests, on the other, correspond to these two faces of social structure.

Giddens (1984) presents a very elaborate development of a dual theory of structure that encompasses both the relational and the ideational aspects of social reality. According to Giddens, social structure represents a kind of grammar that orients social action. While the action constitutes an activity that is situated in space and in time, the structure has only a virtual existence that becomes explicit in the actors' models of action. Another fundamental distinction in Giddens's theorization is made between structure and social system. As has already been mentioned, the notion of structure denotes basic, deep principles: Structure consists of "rules and resources" that the actors employ to manage in situations of social action and interaction (Giddens 1984). However, when he uses the term *social system,* Giddens refers to the concrete relations between actors and collectivities. A social system can, then, be considered to be the manifestation and updating of a particular social structure. The application of rules and resources by the actors involves the production and recursive reproduction of the social structure and, consequently, of the social system. The structure does not consist of the models of social practices that make up the social system but of the principles that give models to the practices. Thus, the two key ideas of Giddens's structuration theory can be as follows: (1) Structure, understood to be the set of rules and resources belonging to a specific social system, limits and makes possible the action of individual actors; and (2) action, insofar as it consists of carrying out and updating the structure, contributes to reaffirming it and transmuting it and, consequently, to reproducing and transforming the social system.

Giddens's theorization has been the object of numerous criticisms, some radical and others more favorable. Among these last ones, Sewell's (1992) stands out: He upholds a revision and broadening of Giddens's theory and focuses on two aspects: the nature of moral rules in the structure of legitimization and the immaterial character of resources. Sewell (1992) criticizes Giddens's concept of rules and advocates substituting it with the "schema" to include "not only formally established prescriptions but also the schema, metaphors, and presuppositions that are assumed by these prescriptions, which are informal and not always conscious" (p. 8). These are procedures that can be generalized to the most diverse contexts of interaction, known or new, and that are applied on several levels of depth, from the deepest levels described by Lévi-Strauss to the most superficial ones, such as protocol norms. The schemata are, therefore, not distinguished by their field of application, as Giddens's distinction between semantic rules in the field of communication and moral rules in the field of sanctions suggests, but by their level of depth.

Sewell's notion of "schema" comes close to Bourdieu's (1989) notion of *habitus,* a system of "durable and moveable" dispositions that generate sensible practices and perceptions capable of giving meaning to the practices that are generated in this way. The dispositions that form the *habitus* operate as mental schemata that routinely orient individuals' actions and offer a practical knowledge of the meaning of what has to be done and of how it should be done. The crucial point is that the mental schemata operate like a filter that puts the options available to the actor in order, without the actor having to actively worry about them (López and Scott 2000:103). Bourdieu (1989) defines the *habitus* as a "structuring structure," since the logical categories with which the social world is perceived are, in turn, a product of the division of social classes. This is the same as saying that the dispositions of the *habitus* depend on the position that the actor occupies in the society's system of differential positions.

Other attempts at synthesis present a kind of contextual vision of social structure that is much broader than the institutional and relational visions but also much more diffuse and indeterminate. From this other point of view, social structures are, simply, the context in which social action happens and develops. According to another exponent of this current, Rytina (1992), social structure

is a general term for any collective social circumstance that is inalterable and given for the individual. Social structure thus provides a context or environment for action. The size of organizations, distribution of activities in space, shared language, and the distribution of wealth might all be regarded as social structural circumstances that set limits on feasible activities for individuals. (P. 1970)

Clearly, with this broad contextual perspective of social structure, we have moved far from the bounded field of norms, or of social relations and positions, to situate ourselves in the diffuse world of all those factors that—inso-far as they are, in some measure, structured—can influence social action.

In summary, the two broad visions of social structure share some generic traits that are implicit in the very idea of structure, but at the same time they present crucial differences. As for the similarities, we will mention three common features. First, the elements of the structure are organized or ordered in some way; in other words, they maintain patterned or nonrandom relations—and, precisely because of this, we can say that they form a structure. Second, these relations among the elements of social structures are constituted by regular or recurring behaviors that are repeated and that give the structures a certain permanence in time and space. And third, these regularities that constitute the social structures condition, in several ways, many social choices and behaviors. As for the differences, it is obvious that these visions of social structure differ, above all, in the specifications they make about which is the fundamental dimension of social structure: normative contexts of action or social positions and relations. This disagreement has, in addition, crucial sociological implications because the analytic key to the explanations of social action depends on which structural aspects or dimensions are judged to be most relevant. In other words, the relevant dimensions of the social

structure—norms or relations and positions—are not only *structured* in the sense that they are ordered, regular, persistent sets, but they are also *structuring* in the sense that they offer opportunities and establish constraints for social action.

THE PROBLEM OF THE LEVELS OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Another problem that any approach to social structure must resolve, no matter which aspect or dimension receives priority, is the question of choosing the units or elements that make up the social structures on which the analysis will focus. The obvious candidates for becoming units of analysis are those social entities that are susceptible to establishing relations, occupying positions, or constituting contexts that are relevant for action. But it is difficult to make an exhaustive list of all the social entities that can operate as units of analysis for social structures. Why is it so hard to make a complete list? The difficulty arises because opting for one entity or another depends, on one hand, on the kind of range that the phenomenon we want to investigate has; it is, thus, an eminently empirical problem that can have many solutions. On the other hand, it depends on the theoretical and methodological orientation chosen, which will favor some structural units over others in explaining the phenomena studied. Furthermore, several inventories of elements are also possible, depending on the degree of abstraction at which we wish to move.

Prendergast and Knottnerus (1994) identify six levels of social structure: interpersonal relations, networks among individuals, relations in organizations, relations among organizations, societal stratification, and the world system. Other classifications are, logically, feasible. But, keeping in mind that the identification of levels reflects growing ranges of complexity, one possibility for classifying these different levels is to resort to a triple scheme that distinguishes, moving from simple to complex, three main social levels: micro, meso, and macro. The crucial factor that allows us to clarify on which level of social structure we should be moving is not only the range of the phenomenon we wish to study but also—and this is equally fundamental—the theoretical and methodological assumptions that we adopt in our explanations of social action.

If we consider that the relevant structural units are individuals and their relations, then we will be getting involved in some form of microsociology of social structure (Homans 1976; Collins 1981; Coleman 1990). As Homans (1987) clearly stated, those who practice this sort of individualist sociology "are most interested in how individuals create social structures" (p. 73). If, for whatever reasons, our interest is focused on intermediate entities such as groups, networks of relations, communities, and organizations, which we consider to be causal agents or independent variables in the social structures analyzed, then we will be practicing some kind of mesosociology. The

sociology of organizations (Perrow 1986) fits into this formulation. Finally, if what attracts our attention are social entities or aggregates that are very complex—either because of the number of elements they contain or because of their high relational density—and if we judge that these complex social structures are the explanatory instances of our dependent variables, then we will situate ourselves in the area of macrosociology. Excellent examples of structural macrosociology can be found in Blau's theories of social structure, in which he explains the phenomena of inequality and heterogeneity (1977a, 1977b) and formulates a set of axioms on the models of social association and interaction drawn from the quantitative characteristics of social structure (Blau 1994).

Sociological literature has resorted, also, to different metaphors to explore the relations among the different levels of the structure (López and Scott 2000). We will present three here. The first one represents the levels of the social structure as being fitted one within the other, such as Chinese boxes. The second one resorts to a geological image and distinguishes between one level that is the base of the structure and the others that are on top of the structure and are conditioned by it. A third metaphor divides social structure into system and subsystem levels.

A Chinese box-type of metaphor is used by Prendergast and Knottnerus (1994) to explain the relation among the different levels of social structure. Both authors understand social structure as systems of social relations that manifest themselves with different levels of complexity and that maintain among themselves nested ties. Blau (1981) has expressed this idea very clearly: "social structures are nesting series with successive levels of more and more encompassing structures" (p. 12). In this perspective, the most complex systems of social relations include the simplest ones, although each level has its own properties and characteristics. Besides, the logic of each level of social structure is not determined by the higher or lower levels of the structure. The notion of social structure that can be deduced from Simmel's ([1908] 1950, [1908] 1955) theorization offers an example of the Chinese box metaphor. Simmel analyzes how the quantitative determination of the group influences the form of its structure. The simplest groups are those made up of only one, two, or three elements. The movement from one of these groups to the next bigger one occurs through the presence of a single added element. Nevertheless, the presence of this added element deeply modifies the structure of group relations. The movement from the dyad to the triad opens up the possibility of new forms of relations that were impossible in a relationship between just two elements. These forms are the "impartial mediator," the *tertius gaudens* (the third who rejoices), and the *divide et impera* (divide and rule). What matters here is that the three types of social configuration—the single element, the dyad, and the triad—can be considered to be forms of elemental relations that are within one another and that, nevertheless, are qualitatively different among themselves. In general, we feel it is

important to underline that this kind of conception of social structure remains essentially neutral with respect to the matter of which is the ultimate, basic element of social structure that conditions the rest.

The base and superstructure model identifies two main levels of social structure and suggests that there is a causal relationship between them (López and Scott 2000). One level, the base or infrastructure, conditions or determines the other, the superstructure. In some versions, this model translates into a strong determinism, according to which the superstructure is nothing more than a simple product or epiphenomenon of the base. In others, some degree of autonomy is acknowledged and the analysis focuses on demonstrating the limits of this autonomy.

The clearest formulation of the base and superstructure model can be found in the theory of Marx. According to this author, the basic structure of a society coincides with the mode of production that characterizes it. Marx distinguishes between the material basis of the social relations of production and the superstructures formed by the political and legal apparatuses and the collective representations (values, norms, ideologies) that are associated with them. In addition, the superstructure reflects the nature of the mode of production and does not have a logic of its own. As for the political superstructure, the institutions of the State and their ways of functioning are designed according to the needs of the productive structure, to guarantee its maintenance by different means of coercion; something similar happens with the ideological superstructure, built to serve the interests of the bourgeoisie by persuading the proletariat of the goodness of the system. In the "Preface" to his *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,* Marx ([1859] 1936) described his approach as follows:

> In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arise a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines consciousness. (Pp. 517–18)

The vision of social structure as something that is formed of systems and subsystems tends to be associated with the theory of Parsons and the school of systems theory that his work has inspired. The idea that is behind Parsons's (1951) AGIL scheme is that to survive, every social system has to fulfill four functional prerequisites: (1) adaptation to the environment (A), (2) the ability to achieve goals (G), (3) integration (I), and (4) latency or maintenance of a latent pattern (L). In the case of the social system as a whole, the following functional subsystems correspond to

each function prerequisite: the economy (A), politics (G), the legal system and the community (I), and, finally, the family, school, and cultural institutions (L). Each of these subsystems can, in turn, be divided into four other subsystems (Collins 1988). The political system, for example, is subdivided into the subsystems of administration (A), executive (G), legislation (I), and Constitution (L). These subsystems can, in turn, be subdivided into other subsystems that fulfill the four functional prerequisites.

What it is important to underline is that in this vision of social structure as opposed to the model of base and superstructure, there is no hierarchical relationship that separates the subsystems into lower and higher levels. A subsystem of action is an analytic aspect that can be abstracted from the total processes of action but does not, in any concrete sense, exist independent of them. On the other hand, the subsystems fit into one another laterally to form the logical and coherent unit of a system of action.

THE PROBLEM OF STRUCTURE AND ACTION

Once the main visions of social structure and the problem of its different levels have been presented, the second part of the debate on this important sociological notion that we will deal with in this chapter refers to the relation between the structural elements and the action of individual actors. Our question here is, To what extent does the structure condition and determine the action of individuals? Or, taking the opposite perspective, To what extent can the structure be considered nothing more than the product of the action of individuals? To present the different responses to these questions, one can distinguish, following Kontopoulos (1993), three main perspectives: the strategy of reduction (or strong individualism), of systemic transcendence (or holism), and of construction (or methodological individualism).[3]

The strategy of reduction in the physical and natural sciences is based on the idea that the structures are nothing more than the parts that make them up and that the highest levels of organization of phenomena are totally determined and explained by the lowest levels of organization. In the case of sociology, the lowest levels of organization from which the higher levels derive are individuals. In other words, the individual actors are the atoms, and structure takes its form and existence from their aggregation. As examples of the strategy of reduction, one can consider Homans's behaviorist sociology and Collins's microtheory of the chain of interaction rituals.

According to Homans (1967), any structure is created and maintained throughout time by the action and interaction of individuals. Thus, to explain a social phenomenon, it is necessary to reduce it to psychological propositions about human conduct and, in particular, to the actors' optimizing intentions. It is important to note that the behaviorist paradigm does not conceive the social structure to be an

entity that is separate and autonomous of individual action. In one of his latest works, Homans (1987) claims,

> When I speak of social structures I shall mean any features of groups that persist for any period of time, though the period may not be long. I shall not attempt, nor shall I need to attempt, any more sophisticated definition. (P. 72)

On the other hand, he acknowledges that individual action is subject to the influence of and to certain restrictions from the actions of other individuals, but he rejects the idea that institutions, organizations, and other structural factors, such as the social stratification system, are anything other than the result of interaction among individuals. In his own words, "The characteristics of groups and societies are the resultants, no doubt the complicated resultants but still the resultants, of the interaction between individuals over time—and they are no more than that" (Homans 1974:12).

Along the same lines, in an article from the early 1980s, Collins (1981) proposed a microrefounding of sociology based on a theory of the chains of ritual interactions. According to this theory, all social phenomena, including social structure, are nothing more than microrepetitions of certain behaviors in the real world. In strict terms, according to Collins's proposal, things such as the "State," the "economy," or a "social class" do not exist.[4] All that exist are collections of individuals who act in specific types of microsituations.

The strategy of systemic transcendence or collectivism is characterized by a strong determinism of the micro parts by the macrosystem interpreted to be an autonomous entity, on the highest level, superimposed on the systemic parts of the lower level in a kind of hierarchical control. In the case of sociology, the approaches that share this epistemic strategy imply a relation between structure and action that opposes the strategy of the theorizations studied up to this point. In other words, the structure is what fundamentally conditions and determines action. In this view, the existence of a deep structure, whether material, cultural, or of another kind, is assumed. This deep structure generates the observable forms of social action and, therefore, is independent of them, so that it can be studied "objectively." Individuals' actions turn out to be nothing more than a reflection of the logics and properties of the structural elements of the system. Examples of these collectivist or holistic kinds of views can be found in the theoretical traditions with functionalist orientations and in some structuralist variants of Marxism.

The clearest origin for this approach can be found in Durkheim's definition of the sociological method and social facts. To found a new social science subjected to the method applied in the natural sciences, Durkheim granted "social facts" a reality independent of individual impulses, whose erratic appearance was disturbing in comparison with the "astonishing regularity" of social phenomena. One basic assumption of Durkheim's sociology is that social facts are be considered and treated as *things* that are external to, and coercive of, the actor. He thus defined social facts as ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that are external to individuals and have coercive power over them. This exteriority is due to the fact that individuals are born into an already constituted society and they are no more than a minimum element in the totality of social relations. The coercive characteristic derives from the mechanisms of social sanction and punishment that are instituted to preserve the network of moral obligations that society is and from the resistance that these mechanisms pose to reform. Individual action is, to a great extent, determined by social causes that cannot be explained by means of individual psychology but only by their relation with other social facts (Durkheim [1895] 1938). According to this approach, complex processes such as the progressive "division of social work" can be described leaving out any reference to the attitudes and preferences of those who participate in them and can be explained by other processes that are also objective, such as the increase in population density, the improvement of communication, or competition for scarce resources.

At the "materialist extreme" of structural approaches, we can also find reasonings according to which individual action is, to a great extent, determined by the structural position occupied. The Marxist terms *class consciousness* and *class action* referred, originally, to thoughts and behaviors derived from the individual's position in the system of production. The social classes' ways of political thinking and acting rest on and are shaped by economic interests. At any rate, it is true that clearly holistic positions have been more frequent among Marxist sociologists than in Marx himself. However, some more recent readings of Marx—particularly the current called analytic Marxism (Roemer 1986)—question an overly deterministic interpretation of his thought and put greater emphasis on the actors' capacity for choice.

Finally, the strategy of construction represents an intermediate position between the two extremes that we have presented in the preceding paragraphs. In recent decades, this approach has been acquiring greater relevance in sociology, perhaps due to its remarkable capacity for orienting empirical research and interpreting the results that it produces. In this approach, the relation between structure and action is bidirectional. On one hand, the restrictions and opportunities of the structural context in which the actor finds himself capacitate and constrain his action. In other words, the structure limits and conditions action. Nevertheless, individuals do not cease to have a margin of freedom in their actions. On the other hand, the aggregation and combination of individual actions can result in emerging, unforeseen, or undesired effects of change in the social structure. In other words, the structure itself is the product of the complex aggregation of individual actions (Boudon 1981). This view demonstrates that individualism and collectivism are not logically incompatible, necessarily opposed positions.

The basic propositions of methodological individualism can be summarized as follows. In the first place, there is a structure of constraints and opportunities associated with the different positions in a given social context. In the second place, the unit of analysis is the individual actor and his intentional actions. The individual actor chooses his course of action intentionally, from among the available options and according to his preferences. Intentional action is understood to be a purposeful action—namely, an action directed toward achieving an objective. The influence of the structure is manifest both in what the actor can do (i.e., his available options) and in what he wants to do as his preferences have been formed in a specific social context. Third, individual actions can produce effects on the structure of constraints and opportunities that are undesired or unexpected by the individuals. These propositions cover and connect different levels of analysis. As Coleman (1990) has observed, the first proposition (how the structure condition individual action) implies a movement from the macrolevel of structure to the microlevel of the actor, while the third (how individual actions can result in a change of the social structure) implies an inverse movement from the microlevel to the macrolevel.

One key aspect of this explanatory model is the actions of individuals. What does it mean when we say that the individual actions depend on the structure of the actors' situation? To answer this question, it is necessary, according to Boudon, to *comprehend* why an individual in a specific situation chooses a particular course of action. Following Weber, comprehending a social action implies, for Boudon (1986), getting enough information to analyze the motivations that inspire the action. An observer *comprehends* the action of the subject observed when he can conclude that in an identical situation, he would have acted in the same way. In general terms, this operation of comprehension implies that the sociologist adopts a particular model of the individual actor. To this end, Boudon and the majority of the sociologists who share the epistemic strategy of construction have used a model of an actor with a rationality limited by the character of the situation in which he finds himself (Simon 1982; Gambetta 1987; Elster 1989). With respect to the economists' classic model of the rational actor,[5] this model observes that there are limits in access to all the relevant information for making a decision. Second, it acknowledges that in certain situations that share a strategic dimension, it is impossible to univocally establish which behavior is the rational one. In situations of this kind, individuals resort to representations that are more or less solidly founded as norms, traditions, or imitations of others to make a decision.

To summarize, the causal explanation of a social phenomenon requires the description of the structural context in which the actors find themselves, a comprehension of the actions in this context, and the reconstruction of the aggregation process of these actions. Boudon (1986) defines this explanatory model as the "Weberian paradigm of action." For the purposes of this chapter, it is important to underline that on the epistemological level, this model attempts to conjugate the explanation of the structure with the phenomenological comprehension of the actor's action. On the analytic level, it seems to offer a flexible, useful framework for investigating the interdependence of structure and action.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter, we have discussed some basic aspects of the sociology of social structure around three questions: (1) What is the ultimate nature of social structure? Or in other words, is it fundamentally collective representations such as norms and values, or relations among actors who occupy social positions? (2) How many levels of structure are there and how do they combine with one another? And finally, (3) what is the relation between structure and the action of an individual actor?

As we have seen, the sociology of social structure is not an intellectually unified field because it lacks a unitary conception of social structure. When sociologists use the term *social structure,* they usually refer to a set of social entities—the elements or constitutive units—that are ordered, organized, or hierarchized in some way and that maintain patterned, nonrandom relations among themselves with a certain permanence in time and space. But beyond this perfunctory commonality in the use of the term, there is no clear agreement about what the fundamental dimension of social structure is.

In this chapter, we have presented the two broad visions of social structure that have been most influential in sociological thought. On one hand, we considered the *institutional* or *cultural* vision of social structure, for which the basic elements are the norms, beliefs, and values that regulate social action. From this point of view, social structure is an *institutional* structure—namely, a set of *cultural* and *normative* models that define the actors' expectations about their behavior. We have also explained how this cultural vision of social structure has developed theoretically in structural functionalism and in the work of its most outstanding representative, Talcott Parsons, and, more recently, in neo-institutionalism. On the other hand, we distinguished the *relational* vision, for which the elements that make up the social structure are, basically, social relations. From this point of view, the analysis of the social structure focuses on the tissue of social relations that connects individuals, groups, organizations, communities, and societies. Modern network analysis exemplifies this second vision very well. A relevant variant of this second vision is the distributive or positional perspective. The representatives of this current of structural thought, among whom we highlighted Peter Blau, consider the social structure to be, above all, an ordered or hierarchical distribution of positions that share certain attributes and that affect people's social relations and interactions.

To the extent that the foundations of both visions—cultural and relational—imply a split image of social reality, several attempts at synthesis have been made to try to overcome this double representation of social structure. Here we have examined some recent theorizations (those of Giddens, Sewell, and Bourdieu) that try to integrate the basic assumptions of both visions in a single analytic framework, considering the normative and relational dimensions of social action jointly. Another attempt to avoid this dual representation of social structure is the definition of social structure in very broad and diffuse terms as the contexts in which social action develops—namely, the varied social circumstances that, being inalterable and given for the individual, provide the surroundings for his social action. From this last point of view, the precise conceptualization of social structure depends, in each case, on the type of social action theory that it defends and on the causal factors to which the proposed explanations point.

In addition to identifying the fundamental dimensions of the social structure, structural sociology faces the matter of choosing the units or elements that make up the social structures. Many classifications are possible, but we advocate a schema that discriminates three broad levels of complexity—micro, meso, and macro. However, deciding on which level of social structure to move depends not only on the phenomenon that we wish to study but also on the theoretical and methodological assumptions of our explanations of social action. Another interesting matter in relation to the levels of social structure is the matter of the images or metaphors that represent the relation among the different levels of the structure. We have presented three metaphors here. The first one represents the levels of social structure fitting into one another as if they were Chinese boxes. The second one resorts to a geological image and distinguishes between one level that is the base of the structure and the others that rest on top of the structure.

A third metaphor divides the social structure into levels of a system and subsystems.

With reference to the relation between structure and action, we have presented two main epistemological and methodological strategies that are opposed: individualism and holism. While the first consists of reducing the structural phenomena to the individual behaviors that form them, moving from the microlevel to the macrolevel, the second one considers individual behaviors as a reflection of the logic of the social structures and moves from the macrolevel to the microlevel. We have also seen that the approach called methodological individualism offers a possibility of overcoming the opposition between individualism and holism. According to this approach, the restrictions and opportunities defined by the structural context in which the actor finds himself condition his action. Nevertheless, individuals do not cease having margins of freedom to choose their courses of action. Besides, the aggregation and combination of individual actions can produce emergent, unforeseen, or undesired effects of change in the social structure. It is important to highlight the idea that the restrictions and opportunities that condition the actor's action can be of a relational nature, as well as cultural or ideational. In other words, they can be determined both by the actor's position in a specific system of social relations and by the cultural, normative, and value orientations that prevail in this system.

Given the current state of our discipline, it is hard to envisage the future development of a fully unified sociology of social structure. As always, theoretical and methodological preferences will determine the results of research on this topic. But the analysis of social structures will keep on being a fruitful field as long as it is able to solve the persistent problems of specifying the pertinent levels of social reality, define the relevant social entities that compose social structures, and disentangle the mutual relationship between social structures and individual action.