SOCIAL STRUCTURES

John Levi Martin

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Preface

From Big Structures to Small

> Now the smallest Particles of Matter may cohere by the strongest Attractions, and compose bigger Particles of Weaker Virtue; and many of these may cohere and compose bigger Particles whose Virtue is still weaker, and so on for divers Successions.
>
> —ISAAC NEWTON, *Opticks*

THE BIRTH of the modern social sciences took place sometime in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, when a number of European thinkers became convinced that there was some sort of order to the social life around them, an order that came neither from God nor from prince but was inherent to social life itself. The first metaphor that was used to describe this order was an organismic one—an old metaphor to be sure, but the new sociologists took this metaphor far more seriously than had earlier political philosophers. In particular, Herbert Spencer (e.g., 1896 [1873]: 56–60) proposed that just as an organism had organs, or structures, that met its functional needs, so society had "social structures" that carried out social functions.

The term *structure* here meant the same as "organ," just as Hobbes's earlier discussion of social "Systemes" also meant organs (see Hobbes 1909 [1651]: 171). In particular, Hobbes saw that the prominent organizations that comprised the modern nation-state met functions just as surely as did the organs in a body. While the social scientists, understanding this metaphor to be more than a figure of speech, refrained from some of the excessively detailed allegories made by Hobbes (such as spies being the "eyes" of the realm), they too suggested that the most visible social structures, namely, the organizations making up the nation-state, existed because they fulfilled certain functions. The army defended against enemies; the executive branch of the government was, as Durkheim (1933 [1893]: 132) also suggested, a social brain.

Nowadays the organismic context for the idea of social structure has receded into the background, and "social structures" are loosely taken to indicate almost any form of regularity or constraint in social life. Yet part of the nineteenth-century legacy remains—a belief that analyzing such structures requires that we begin by looking at the big picture, as big as we possibly can.

And yet even the big social structures that inspired the reverent study of the first sociologists historically arise as a concretion of previously existing smaller structures. Over time, they change and their original form is smoothed over, but in periods of social dislocation we have the opportunity of rediscovering the elemental fact that big structures are put together out of smaller pieces (Simon 1962: 473; Gould 2003: 151).[1]

Most recently, the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe has brought this home, as we have been able to witness new patterns of regular social interaction develop by necessity. It was first assumed by many that the introduction of market society would smash apart all preexisting ties that had been part of the authoritative mechanism for the interfirm transactions of state socialism. Evidence of widespread survival of such ties was frequently taken as a sign of corruption or a sullen refusal to go with the flow. But those who have interviewed economic actors find these interpretations ungenerous. In the midst of confusion and chaos, new sets of exchange relations had to be pieced together, and starting from scratch would mean trading with people whom one had no particular reason to trust. It certainly made more sense to trade with those one knew, even if this is, according to some textbooks, not the most "efficient" choice (see recently Keister 2001: 337; Stark 1996).[2] Thus the new structures of market-based economic interaction were composed by a reassembling of surviving components of the former large-scale structures of state socialism.

More generally, the structures we see around us—up to and including the state organizations that first inspired analogies to organismic structures—in most cases also developed from smaller components. These components in turn may be residues of a shattered former large-scale structure, or, more interestingly, they may have been generated from even smaller units, namely interpersonal relationships.

Could we reconstruct the process, at least analytically, whereby individual relationships combine to form structural units, and these structural units then aggregate to form large-scale structures? And could we do this without relying on a tendentious evolutionary history such as that of Spencer? We might, if different sorts of relationships naturally lend themselves to certain structural forms. And it is precisely this—that certain relationships have inherent structural potentials—that I will attempt to demonstrate here. With this correspondence between type of relationship and structural form, we can begin with types of relationships and find the forms that are likely to arise in the absence of other disturbing factors. In certain circumstances, these structural forms may comprise the building blocks of larger structures. This book is thus an attempt to begin an analysis of the structural tendencies inherent in certain forms of relationships, and their eventual consequences up to and including some of the structures that first impressed Spencer and the other organismic thinkers. I begin by proposing a way to think about structure, and then survey the simplest forms of structure that tend to arise in social interactions.

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[1] Spencer had such a conception of tracing large structures back to smaller components, but he proposed a simple historical progression that proved untenable. Also see Park (1974: 141) for a recognition of the importance of local structures for large scale political structures.

[2] Recently, Hanley, King, and János (2002) have taken issue with Stark's description of Hungary, but the difference may simply be due to changes that have occurred since around 1990 (see 2002: 135 and n.5 for complications in judging ownership patterns). This would actually support the interpretation of Stark's work made here.

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Introduction: Social Action and Structures

> The large systems and the super-individual organizations that customarily come to mind when we think of society, are nothing but immediate interactions that occur among men constantly, every minute, but that have become crystallized as permanent fields, as autonomous phenomena. As they crystallize, they attain their own existence and their own laws, and may even confront or oppose spontaneous interaction itself.
> —GEORG SIMMEL, *Fundamental Problems of Sociology*

The Dialectic of Institutionalization

We set out, then, to determine where structures such as those impressing the early social theorists (for example, the army) "come from." In any strict historical sense, our answer will of course be "other structures." And so on, all the way down. This seems a dead end, and so there is pressure to replace the historical interpretation of this question with an analytic one. The functionalist approach, which so enthralled the early social theorists, did just this. Although the results of this effort were less than satisfying, the idea of an analytic response is not intrinsically a poor one.

The functionalist approach basically turns the "where" question into a "why" question: *why* does society *have* an army? But one can pose an analytic "where" question if one were to make two assumptions: first, that we can conduct some sort of analysis whereby we identify *components* of structures, and second, that it is *noncontradictory* to propose that the structure can be produced via the aggregation of these components. Neither of these assumptions is always reasonable. Regarding the first, not all things are susceptible to analysis because not all things have separable parts. Regarding the second, in some cases parts cannot be imagined to exist separate from the whole (for example, we cannot say a body "comes from" organs because we cannot imagine the organs existing independently). But structures like the army are composed of things that do exist separately, and hence we may pose an analytic frame to our question.

Indeed, there is in sociology one extremely general, and extremely satisfying, answer along these lines, and this is that structures "come from" the crystallization of relationships. The most elegant formulation of this idea was

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made by the theorist Georg Simmel. In contrast both to the methodological individualists such as Weber who did not speak of "society" as a thing, and to the collectivists such as Comte who considered society akin to an organism, Simmel saw society as a web of crystallized interactions. While there is no "society" as a thing in itself but only persons and their action (and so Weber was technically correct), these interactions themselves have a tendency to reify, to become thinglike, and even to guide spontaneous action (and so Comte was on to something). What we mean by society, then, is simply the set of permanent interactions, "crystallized as definable, consistent structures," that is, institutions. An institution may remain even after the sentiment or purpose that gave rise to it is gone; indeed, it can even (in the words of Marx) appear as an "alien power" that hangs over the heads of the persons whose interactions comprise it (Simmel 1950 [1908]: 9f, 41, 96, 380f).[1]

Interestingly, Simmel's archenemy Emile Durkheim, would-be dogmatic founder of a functionalist school largely in the Comtian tradition, frequently agreed. Durkheim occasionally proposed that social institutions, rather than being explicable in terms of what Comte called social statics (the functional organization of the social body), must be understood as the emergent effects of the dynamics of social action. "Certain of these social manners of acting and thinking acquire, by reason of their repetition, a certain rigidity which on its own account crystallizes them, so to speak, and isolates them from the particular events which reflect them" (Durkheim 1938 [1895]: 45).[2]

Both Simmel and Durkheim, then, help us understand what often seems paradoxical: how society can seem like a thing outside us and frequently opposed to us, when it is nothing but the aggregate of our own actions. This understanding is left largely as intuition or vision—a general answer to the question of "what is society" but not generative of empirical understanding.[3] It expresses how we can *conceive* of the generation of patterns of social interaction without necessarily making any focused claims as to the nature of empirical processes of institution formation. While a number of recent approaches to the nature of social order build on this general insight (specifically those of Giddens 1984; Bourdieu 1984 [1979]; and White 1992),[4] they tend to supplement their account with specific substantive claims that are not inherent to the basic understanding of the relation between action and institution suggested by Durkheim and Simmel. The fundamental vision put forward by all these authors may be formulaically put as follows: social interactions, when repeated, display formal characteristics; and this form can then take on a life of its own, ultimately leading to institutions that we (as actors) can treat as given and exogenous to social action for our own purposes, though at any moment (or at least at some moments) these institutions may crumble to the ground if not rejuvenated with compatible action.

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[1] For Simmel, the story does not end here, for "sociation continuously emerges and ceases and emerges again." The basic relationship between the impulse toward sociation (social interaction) and these petrified forms is understood by Simmel to be dialectical in the Hegelian/vitalist sense of a dynamic interplay between the *content* of sociation—our desire to enter into relationships—and the particular structural *form* that may emerge. This version of the dialectic was formulated by Hegel (1949 [1803]) and the implications for the estrangement, whereby our actions become things oriented against us, basically introduced via Feuerbach (1983 [1843]), Marx and Engels (1976 [1845–46]: especially 47f), and Marx (1906 [1867]: 81ff). On Simmel's balancing of form and content, see Simmel (1955 [1922]: 172).

[2] The only difference between this formulation of Durkheim's and Simmel's version is that while Simmel somewhat romantically stressed the potential for estrangement of the living essence in this petrification, Durkheim welcomed the process of crystallization as it eased the task of the analyst who would find herself totally at sea were she surrounded by a host of uncrystallized relations. "Social life consists, then, of free currents perpetually in the process of transformation and incapable of being mentally fixed by the observer, and the scholars cannot approach the study of social reality from this angle. But we know that it possesses the power of crystallization without ceasing to be itself" (Durkheim 1938 [1895]: 45).

We have perhaps as a discipline spent too much time in taking turns at giving a somewhat more elegant phrasing to this insight as opposed to determining whether it is amenable to empirical elaboration. Because this understanding is, as noted above, a form of dialectic, it is somewhat resistant to being put in the form of directed graphs of arrows between variables that have so enamored social scientists. But there is a possible foothold for analysis, as we see two moments in this process. In the first, certain patterns of interaction recur with sufficient regularity among different sets of persons that we (as analysts) can recognize formal characteristics that are independent of the individuals involved. Most important, there are conditions under which interpersonal interactions tend to align and structure themselves. Structure emerges, perhaps, out of unstructured interactions quite like the emergence of crystalline structure in a seeming fluid. From a single seed, it is possible for structure to spread, at least if there is no external force jarring the components.[5]

In the second—just as Simmel argued—there comes a point when such structure seems to take on a life of its own, something that can be referred to by persons as if it existed apart from the myriad interactions that compose it. Instead of simply noticing that there are recurrent patterns, we can make reference to these patterns as independent entities that make predictable demands on us. It is at this point that we speak of an institution.

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[3] I have previously (Martin 2001) argued that this form of social theory is necessarily "weak" and not generative of sociological research, a claim that I now partially repent.

[4] White (1992: 127, cf. 136) puts it more graphically: "Social organization is like some impacted, mineralized goo. . . ."

[5] It is worth emphasizing that the word *structure* will here be used only in the sense of patternings of relationships, without prejudice to other possible forms of regularity that some might wish to term "structural."

An institution exists when interactants subjectively understand the formal pattern in terms of the *content* of relationships. Marriage as an institution has particular structural characteristics: it (in the simplest conventional monogamous version) divides both men and women into two classes each, the unmarried and the married. The married are paired with one and only one member of the married class of the opposite sex. When navigating the world structured by such relations, however, people tend to focus on the content of the institution of marriage as opposed to these structural features. Here they are focusing not on the content of any *particular* marriage (happy or unhappy in its own way), but on the content of the *institution* of marriage. This content may be seen as the translation of the formal characteristics of marriage as a set of dyads into a subjective sense of what marriage "is all about": trust, commitment, exclusivity, and so on (Swidler 2001). For actors to focus on the content seems a wise choice, as this is easier to translate into action imperatives in any situation than are purely structural principles.[6]

This is not to say that relationships lacked all content before such a development of structure. But it is reasonable to suggest that their content is changed and perhaps elaborated by structural formations and, even more important, persons can get a different *conception* of the content of the relationship when they abstract general principle from concrete structures. Second, we may propose as a thought experiment arranging persons into structures and finding that the experience of traversing such formations induces subjective understandings of the "content" of these relationships. (Such an experiment was done to surprising success by Breer and Locke [1965]). Finally, it is worth emphasizing that in no way does this approach deny that the structure of relationships is in part a function of their content. But this is hardly surprising. What is more interesting is that the reverse may also be the case and in fact that attention to this process gives us analytic purchase in understanding the development of large-scale structures from small.[7] Demonstrating this point, however, awaits substantive examinations.

Such examination is the goal of the following pages. This book traces the emergence of structure up to but not quite including the point at which cultural understandings become detached from concrete patterns. Starting from the simplest elements of interpersonal interaction, we examine the formation of obdurate patterns of organization, and their potential alignment into larger structures.

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[6] We may also propose that the contents of relationships, when sufficiently strong and generalized, become detachable from any particular structural form and can be connected in *fields* in which the alignment of content, and not of form, is of paramount importance. Casual inspection suggests that the bulk of social action is best explained by reference to these overarching cultural fields and not to isolated institutions nor to concrete and necessarily local structures. Yet to understand these fields, we may need to trace them back to the simplest structures.

[7] As Jad Fair has pointed out, it is no news if a dog bites a man. But man bites dog—front page!

If we refuse to entertain any explanation of the regularities in social life that does not end up with an arrow pointing one way and not the other we are unlikely to get very far in the current project. We cannot begin here with the sort of "theory" from which testable hypotheses may be derived. But it may well be for the very reason that it lacks a formally elegant and logically integral structure that this understanding escapes what the Buddhists call "the stage of playwords"—a stage of unproductive obsession with terminology that for sociological theory is frequently terminal. Since we cannot get very far simply juxtaposing theoretical terms, we must begin looking very carefully at how social structures actually form. In this chapter, I lay out the understanding of structure that will be used, its relation to persons, and to their subjective conceptions.

What Might We Mean by Social Structure?

Social Structure as Position and Expectation

The arguments given above imply that we begin our attempt to understand social life by examining the forms that repeated interactions tend to take. We might reasonably call this the formation of social structure, or perhaps better, of social structures in the plural. Unfortunately, the term *social structure* is used by social scientists in a number of different ways. Many of these are unpardonably vague, basically meaning "anything that makes people do something they don't want to do." Others are implausibly specific, especially those that attempted to synthesize the classic structuralism of the Levi-Strauss variety with more intuitive understandings of the sets into which people seemed to be clumped, especially social classes. In practice, however, this vision was difficult to distinguish from the functionalist one mentioned in the preface.

This functionalist idea of social structure, coming from Spencer, was based on an organismic analogy. Just as organs and bones are structures of a body, so there are structures in society. This vision, while generative and profound, offers little for the current investigation, because structure is necessarily defined in relation to the properties of the transcendent whole, society. We, on the other hand, are attempting to trace the generation of transindividual consistencies in action and cannot assume the existence of what we set out to derive.

But there is another coherent approach to social structure coming from anthropology, especially the work of Linton (1936). Here social structures are understood as agglomerations of statuses and their action-counterparts, roles. The family is therefore a social structure, since it has a set of predefined roles that shape interaction. This account has the seeming virtue of emphasizing the importance of subjective expectations, which the theorists agree, play a crucial role in the development of structure. Yet, as we shall see, for the very reason that the Lintonian approach makes this link central ab initio, despite its real insights, it may make a poor starting place for theoretical investigation.

To Linton, the anthropologist's job of mapping out societies would lead to a conception of the structure of the society in question as the anthropologist learned the various "slots" into which persons could be fitted: for an example of kinship structure these could include mother, brother, mother's brother, wife, husband, mother's husband. Linton called such a slot a "status," a "collection of rights and duties." That is as much as to say that it is a set of expectations: rights are what we may expect from others, duties are what others may expect from us. The point is that every slot in the social structure that has a name—that is socially understood as a meaningful category—has attached to it these expectations. And that is why society functions so smoothly. When we interact with one another, chances are good that we are not simply interacting as two unique individuals, but as two statuses, so that what we can expect from one another is remarkably clear. Since every status has its "dynamic aspect"—a role—one knows what the status calls on one to do.

The confusing thing is that social structure—regularities in interaction—then turns out to be at base a matter of shared expectations. This, in turn, implies that the fundamental ordering principles of societies are *cultural.* Talcott Parsons (1968; Parsons and Shils 1956) followed this line of theorizing to its logical conclusions. Consequently, despite the common division of "variables" into the trinity of cultural, structural, and personality in the Parsonian world, culture always trumps structure and personality, for the ultimate cultural values are the "topmost controlling component of the social system." Structure is the embodiment of culture as expectations, and personality is the introjection of culture via socialization.

Consequently, it was difficult to propose that there was any analytically useful distinction between culture and social structure—between the subjective conceptions of actors and the action patterns that an analyst might uncover. To call status and role structural, when there was a one-to-one mapping between structure and normative considerations that were ultimately tied to cultural values, was as much as to call the front end of a dog culture and his tail end social structure. To steal a phrase from the great Jim Stockinger, we might say that in the American functionalist tradition culture—more specifically, *values*—gobbled up social structure.[8]

This same paradox haunted Parsons's approach to institutions: it was never clear whether institutions were about *knowing* what to do, or in doing it, since

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[8] Even when Parsons (1960: 19f, 22) turned to the analysis of organizations, which might seem to be the perfect site for a purely structural analysis, the two possible points of view he proposed were the cultural-institutional, based on values, and the "group" or "role" point of view, which also assumed normative expectations.

Parsons defined away in advance the possibility that regularities in action could arise without shared expectations. Consequently, despite its evident plausibility—indeed, it is because of it—this line of theorizing collapsed structures, culture, and institutions, when there are good theoretical reasons for keeping these distinct. There is no reason to forbid, at least for analytic purposes, a difference between regularities in interaction (structure) and those institutions that appear as givens for individuals engaging in interaction. Many of the formations considered to be "structures" in the Lintonian understanding (such as the family) are better thought of as "institutions." In other words, any useful definition of social structure has to allow for regularities in interaction that are *not* institutions, and that do *not* arise because interactants understand their normative responsibility to act in a certain way.

To preserve such a distinct sense of "structure," I propose that we begin by considering social structure simply as regular patterns of interaction, and leave to the side the question of why these patterns exist. In particular, we should leave open, at least for a while, the relation between such patterns and large-scale cultural expectations. The nearest attempt to formulate a theory of social structure along vaguely Lintonian lines minus the emphasis on subjectivity was made by Nadel (1957), an approach now being resuscitated by theorists such as White (1992).[9]

It is indeed hard to imagine how structure could arise and "guide behavior" (as Nadel says) in the absence of such rules. But as Turner (1994) has demonstrated, with closer attention, it is hard to say how rules can guide behavior at all—that is, how "structure" can be something outside us forcing us to do things. Frederik Barth (1981: 22, 32, 34–37, 48), building on Nadel, made a radical simplification by divorcing structure (or form) from culture and making the degree of connection an empirical question rather than definitionally true. He argued that there could be a study of forms of regular interaction without assuming that these are "causes" of action. In place of such a causal frame, he argued that we must examine the "constraints and incentives" that "canalize choices," some perhaps cutting a channel deep enough to be considered an institution. Seen in this light, it becomes apparent that investigations of social structure have been derailed by the fantastic belief that social structure is something that *causes* regularities in action, when social structure is simply what

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[9] White and his colleagues (White, Boorman, and Breiger 1976; Boorman and White 1976) used—and to some degree fused—Nadel's (1957) idea of treating networks as interlocks of mutually dependent relationships, and his idea of role systems as restricted sets of possible combinations of roles. This produced a conception of structure as sets of regularities in the ways in which relationships can aggregate. But Nadel himself actually never relinquished the idea of a role as primarily a *normative*, and hence subjective, construct (1957:16, 24). Indeed, while White was able to find the presence of roles simply on the basis of observed regularities, Nadel (1957: 140f, 147f) refused to accept that there could be a form of orderliness that guided behavior that was not formulated as rules with sanctions.

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