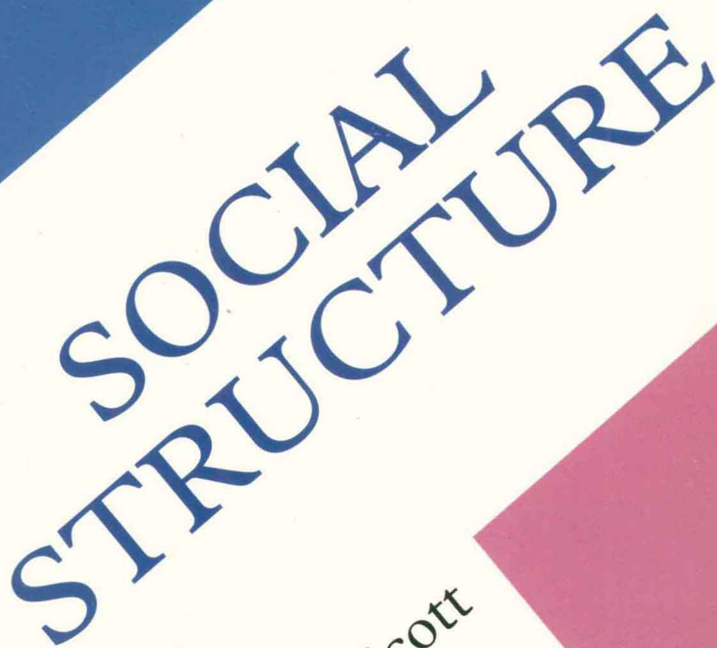

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

José López and John Scott

Concepts in the Social Sciences

Social Structure

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1 What is Social Structure?

'Social structure' has always been one of the central concepts in sociological theory and analysis. Indeed, it has now become something of a commonplace to see the major disputes of contemporary sociology as organized around the dualism of 'structure' and 'action'. While there have been many discussions of the nature and meaning of social action, there have been very few definitional works on social structure. Indeed, social structure is usually treated as a taken-for-granted concept that is not in need of any explicit definition or discussion. Actual uses of the concept, however, are strikingly nebulous and diverse. As a result, there is little consensus over what the word means, and it is all too easy for sociologists to be talking at cross purposes because they rely on different, and generally implicit, conceptions of social structure.

This peculiar situation – that one of the discipline's central concepts is so misunderstood – is clear from the definitions of social structure that are given in the leading dictionaries of sociology. One of the most important of these defines social structure as 'A term loosely applied to any recurring pattern of social behaviour; or, more specifically, to the ordered interrelationships between the different elements of a social system or society' (Concise Oxford Dictionary of Sociology 1994: 517). Having given this very general characterization, the dictionary disarmingly adds, 'However, there is no generally agreed meaning, and attempts at providing succinct definitions have proved singularly unsuccessful.' In a strikingly similar way, another dictionary holds that social structure is 'Any relatively enduring pattern or interrelationship of social elements . . . The more or less enduring patterns of social arrangements within a particular society' (Collins' Dictionary of Sociology 1991:

597). This dictionary entry, too, goes on to say that 'No single concept of social structure exists in sociology, despite its widespread usage.'

These dictionary definitions have undoubtedly highlighted the central idea behind the use of the word 'structure': it is a pattern or arrangement of elements. They further show that a specifically *social* structure is a pattern or arrangement of the elements of a society. But this does not get us very far, as it tells us neither what the elements are, nor how the patterns are sustained. What does it mean to talk about a 'pattern' of social behaviour, and exactly where do we find the pattern as opposed to the behaviour itself?

Our aim in this book is to draw out the concepts of social structure that have actually been employed in sociological discussions. We want to make both clear and explicit a concept that has come to be not only vague and implicit, but also highly contested. We think that this task can be facilitated by drawing on the analysis or 'history of concepts' developed by Bachelard (1937), Canguilhem (1968, 1977) and Foucault (1971). Although these authors engaged in different substantive areas (Bachelard in physics and mathematics, Canguilhem in the life sciences and Foucault in the human sciences), and developed distinctive methodologies, they nonetheless shared some core assumptions concerning the analysis of scientific concepts.

In the first place, the meaning of a concept cannot be determined with reference to everyday language; its meaning has to be understood in the context of the conceptual or discursive networks in which it is embedded and used. Consequently, we will not simply pick on each and every use of the *term* 'social structure'. The term has sometimes, for example, been used to refer to statistical patterns and distributions such as those reported in demographic and economic investigations (Marsh 1961). This use, however, trades on the scientific value of the idea of 'structure' without developing any conceptual understanding of it. In contrast, we seek to explore the various conceptual frameworks within which ideas of social structure have been formulated, showing how the assumptions made in these frameworks have shaped the ways in which social structure is understood.

Second, a concept is not a theory. A concept in itself is not an explanation. Instead, a good concept demarcates a phenomenon of interest so that theoretical explanatory strategies can be developed. Thus although concepts are integrated in theories, their meanings

cannot be merely derived from knowledge of, or the logical architecture of, a theory. In fact, it is possible to have a number of competing theories using the same concept (Gutting 1989: 34), as it is also possible to have concepts that are not properly integrated with other concepts in a theory. Thus concepts have a relative autonomy from the logical structure of the theories in which they are embedded. We believe that the analytical importance of this is that a history of a concept, as well as its associated meanings, need not be understood merely in terms of a history of theoretical traditions – though, as we will show, they often do cluster around them.

As we see it, 'social structure' and its associated terms have most typically been used as ways of describing the *organization* of social life, just as structural thinking in other disciplines has been motivated by attempts to theorize the specific forms of organization that define their subject matters. Thus, there can be structural analyses of physical phenomena, chemical phenomena, mental phenomena, and, of course, social phenomena. Our focus is on concepts of social structure, and we seek to elucidate the various concepts that have been employed – in whatever terminology – to grasp the structural aspects of social life. If 'structure' is to be understood, for the moment, to mean pattern or arrangement – as opposed to that which is 'random' or 'chaotic' – then our aim is to see in exactly what ways the pattern or arrangement of social life has been understood.

We will show that the history of sociology shows the long-term coexistence of two different conceptions of social structure. On the one hand, there is that which we identify as the idea of *institutional structure*. Here, social structure is seen as comprising those cultural or normative patterns that define the expectations that agents hold about each other's behaviour and that organize their enduring relations with each other. On the other hand, there is the idea of what we call *relational structure*. Here, social structure is seen as comprising the social relations themselves, understood as patterns of causal interconnection and interdependence among agents and their actions, as well as the positions that they occupy.

Debates in theoretical and empirical sociology have, in large part, been shaped by the rivalry between advocates of these two different concepts of social structure. Advocates of institutional structure and of relational structure have sometimes seen their preferred idea as being the *only* valid concept of social structure to employ. More typically, however, there has been simply a difference of emphasis.

Those who have emphasized institutional structure have tended to see relational structure as being of secondary and, perhaps, derivative importance, while those who have emphasized relational structure have seen institutional structure as the secondary factor.

We do not think it is useful or sensible to propound either of these claims at such a general level. As we highlighted above, concepts are not rigorously defined by theoretical strategies. In fact the meaning of a concept is never entirely closed, as post-structuralists have rightly argued.[1] As a result, in trying to uncover the meaning of the concept of social structure, we will show that the concept has more depth and that its meanings are more diverse than is often revealed in discussions of it. The concept of social structure points to a complex articulation of the institutional and relational elements of social life. The relative importance of the two aspects of social structure is something that will vary from one situation to another and about which it is impossible to generalize. What is quite clearly implied by this view, however, is the belief that analyses of institutional structure and relational structure offer *complementary*, not alternative, frameworks of sociological analysis. Sociology will prosper only if it recognizes this.

Recently, however, new understandings of social structure have come to challenge these established views. Inspired by developments in theoretical linguistics, anthropology and, more recently, evolutionary psychology, a new conceptual framework has made itself felt in sociological debates. Those working within this intellectual context have argued that social structure must be seen as analogous to the grammatical structures of speech and texts. According to this point of view, patterns of institutions and relations result from the actions of individuals who are endowed with the capacities or competencies that enable them to produce them by acting in organized ways. These capacities are behavioural dispositions, and so social structure has to be seen as an *embodied structure*. Embodied structures are found in the habits and skills that are inscribed in human bodies and minds and that allow them to produce, reproduce, and transform institutional structures and relational structures.

Proponents of the idea of embodied structure have tended to see it as being the most fundamental aspect of social structure. Indeed, many have denied that there is any other kind of social structure at all. For those who work within post-structuralism and post-modernism, for example, grand narratives of social structure – along with those other grand narratives of society and social system – must be

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abandoned (Lemert 1998). They hold that there is no whole or totality separate from the *structuring* activities and practices that are engaged in by individual actors.

Our view is, again, that this is too extreme. Institutional structures and relational structures do depend, as we will show, on embodied structures, but this does not make them any the less real. Social structure, in our view, is a concept that points to three interdependent aspects of the organization of social life: the institutional, the relational, and the embodied. The power of sociological analysis lies in the recognition of this. Those approaches that have emphasized one aspect to the exclusion of all others tend to lose their intellectual power and vitality. The complementarity of the three aspects of social structure, and the need to work with them all, must be kept firmly at the centre of sociological attention.

This view should not be taken as implying any priority for 'structure' over 'action'. The supposed incompatibility of these two ideas is overstated, and the suggestion that sociological researchers must choose between them is misguided. Social structures, as we will show, depend on the existence of human beings that act and exercise agency. However, they cannot be reduced to these actions, and so they cannot be eliminated from sociological analysis. At the same time, of course, actions are always and necessarily structured by the social contexts in which they occur. There can be no action without structure (Archer 1995).

The duality of action and structure in sociological debate is, at most, a reflection of an intellectual division of labour, a methodological 'bracketing' of one set of concerns in order to concentrate on another. In this book, we bracket off questions of action and agency in order to concentrate on those of social structure. But this must be recognized for the methodological convenience that it is. No ultimate priority of structure over action is implied.

We have organized our discussion of social structure around the three aspects that we have identified. Chapter 3 looks at institutional structure, Chapter 4 at relational structure, and Chapter 6 at embodied structure. In Chapter 5 we examine those views of social structure that have been concerned with attempting to represent its ontological depth or levels of social complexity. These views are clustered around three conceptual frameworks: base/superstructure, system/subsystem and social fields. We will show that an understanding of the possibilities contained in this facet of social structure is another crucial element in the development of concepts that are

capable of capturing the complex organization that constitutes social life.

In Chapter 2 we trace the emergence and establishment of structural thinking in a range of scientific disciplines, tracing the sequences of uses through which the meaning of 'structure' was gradually refined and then applied within the emerging discipline of sociology in the nineteenth century. We look, in particular, at the ways in which these ideas were explored in the works of Spencer and Durkheim, whose discussions of social structure set the scene for all that followed.

A developmental approach informs our discussions in each of the other chapters, though we have deliberately avoided presenting the work of the writers that we discuss as a sequence of schools of thought. We attempt to present a history of the concept of structure, which is not the same as a history of social thought. We also do not provide a sociology of sociology, in which modes of thought are constantly related to the social and historical contexts that give birth to them. In sum, we do not try to relate concepts of social structure exclusively to particular traditions of social thought, to the works of particular geniuses, or to particular historical periods. We aim to show how the concepts have arisen in diverse schools and in the works of a wide range of authors. On the other hand, we do not want to imply that the emergence and development of sociological ideas can be seen simply as the cumulative outcome of a subjectless process. Both the history of social thought and the sociology of sociology are important approaches to knowledge, but our aim in this book is different. It is a contribution to debates over social structure that derives much support from these concerns, but which, ultimately, aims to present intellectually coherent accounts of the various concepts of social structure and to demonstrate their contemporary relevance to the sociological debates of today.

2 Conceptualizing Social Structure

We have argued that debates over the concept of social structure can be more fruitfully pursued by making explicit the conceptual networks from which the different uses of the concept obtain their meaning. In doing so, however, it is important to realize that the concept of 'structure' had its own history before it was used to conceptualize social organization. Having reviewed this history, we will go on to show how these networks of concepts were used by nineteenth-century writers to gradually build a picture of what they variously called the 'social organism' or the 'social mind'. We will look, in particular, at the works of the two leading writers to present systematic accounts of social structure: Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim. This will not only clarify their use of the concept of social structure or organization. It will also show how the conceptual networks from which they drew their concepts allowed them to make important theoretical innovations while at the same time constraining what they could say.

'Structure' before 'social structure'

The English word 'structure' derives from the Latin word *struere*, to build. The – *ure* ending is used in English to form nouns that denote an action or a process, or that refer to the result or outcome of a process. Hence, 'structure' can mean 'building' in both of its principal senses. It can mean the act of building something, and it can mean the end product of a building process. Its core meaning,

therefore, is related to that of other words such as 'constructing' and 'forming'. The word was widely used in this sense in the fifteenth century to refer to an actual physical building or edifice (such as a house or a cathedral) and also to the principles behind its construction. This latter usage pointed to the balance of forces that gave the building its particular shape or form. The term 'structure', therefore, specifically implied the inner arrangement, composition or organization of the constituent elements of a building. A structure was a building or edifice that owed its distinctive characteristics to the fact that its parts were organized in some specific way.

'Structure' retained this range of meaning through much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, its main usage being in practical architecture and the science of geometry that explored the abstract mathematical properties of different kinds of structure. The massive growth of the physical sciences, however, involved an extension of the concept into new scientific areas. Hooke, for example, looked at the forces of tension and compression that result from the changes in shape that a structure undergoes when subjected to a load. He distinguished 'elastic' structures, that recover their shape when a load is removed, from 'plastic' structures that do not. In the nineteenth century, Cauchy made the first significant advance on Hooke's work when he introduced the concepts of 'stress' and 'strain' to investigate the elasticity and plasticity of structures. These novel ideas were responsible for the massive strides that were made in engineering during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as the mechanics of tension structures and compression structures were applied to the construction of such things as bridges, ships, aircraft, and 'skyscraper' blocks.

The extension of structural ideas from architecture to engineering encouraged their use in other scientific disciplines. During the nineteenth century, the word 'structure' came to be used in biology to refer to a combination of connected and interdependent parts that make up an organism. The wing of a bird and the leg of a mammal, for example, were seen as particular, specialized structures. Whole organized bodies – organisms – were seen as complex organized combinations of organs and other elements, and they could themselves be seen as biological structures.

At around this same time, 'structure' was also beginning to be used in geology to describe the patterns of rock formation that make up the earth's crust and surface layers, and in chemistry to describe the arrangement of atoms into molecules. The word 'structure',

then, was coming to be seen as a technical, scientific term that could be used in a whole variety of fields to describe the arrangement of the parts of any complex, organized whole into a specific pattern or form.

Much of this structural thought, however, was purely static, treating structures as timeless Platonic forms. There was little idea of the development or transformation of structures. This was true even in biology. Richard Owen was, by the 1840s, the leading exponent of the idea that different forms of life could be grouped according to similarities in their anatomy and physiology and that the various groups could each be related to one of a small number of archetypal structures. The members of each group could, furthermore, be arranged in a sequence from lower to higher levels of organization relative to their archetype. What he and those influenced by him would not accept was the idea that these were sequences of evolution in which one structure could develop or transform itself into another. If cathedrals did not transform themselves into bridges, why should it be believed that one species could evolve into another?

Darwin, of course, was to supply precisely the reason why this should be believed, firmly linking the idea of structure to that of development. Support for developmental ideas had been growing in geology and biology through the nineteenth century, from Lamarck through Lyell to Spencer, but no one had yet provided a clear picture of the mechanism that could make the transmutation of structure possible. Although Darwin felt that he had discovered a solution to this problem by the 1830s, he kept this knowledge secret until he felt that it could be published without being rejected out of hand by the religious orthodoxy. Publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859 finally showed that structural development was possible not only within the lifetime of a particular individual, but also across sequences of species. Structural analysis could, then, be dynamic as well as static (Thompson 1917).

It was in this conceptual and theoretical context that the pioneer sociologists began to grapple with the idea of *social* structure. The notion that societies could be regarded as organized wholes can, of course, be traced back at least as far as Plato and Aristotle, but it was not until the rapid development of the natural sciences in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that this became a common way of approaching the social world. The physical, chemical and biological sciences were seen as having made great strides by focusing

on their characteristic subject matters and adopting a structural approach to their study. Many began to feel that a science of society could be achieved through the same means. Comte, for example, saw each of these sciences as showing a progressively higher level of organization in its subject matter. There was a hierarchy of sciences, with sociology being the last to develop because of the particularly complex nature of the organization of its subject matter.

Early sociology borrowed many ideas from the more advanced natural sciences, and these sciences, in turn, not infrequently borrowed them back. Thus, Condorcet sought to explore the mathematical aspects of social structure, while Claude Bernard, and others, explored physiology on the analogy of 'society'. These shared ideas were not necessarily seen as 'borrowing' or 'imitating' at all, as structural ideas of organization and complexity had come to be seen as common features of the scientific worldview, in both the natural and the social sciences (Vergata 1994).

The attempt to theorize a distinctively *social* form of organization through the concept of social structure threw up a problem that has remained a contentious point of debate in the human sciences until the present. This is the question of whether a social structure has an existence independent of the individual human beings that are its ultimate elements. This arose because social and mental structures seemed to have a slightly different character from those of architecture, physics and biology. In all the areas in which the word 'structure' had been used until the middle of the nineteenth century, structures were either visible or, in principle, observable. They could actually be seen, with or without the aid of instruments of observation. This was not the case in the newly expanding sciences of psychology and sociology: neither mental processes nor social institutions were observable independently of the individuals who held them or produced them. Spencer, for example, held that structures of interdependence in social life, no matter how real, were not material entities and so could not be directly observed. They could be studied only through inference and through the observation of their consequences.

The non-observability of social structures meant that, initially, sociologists were very vague about precisely *what* social structure was thought to be. It seemed possible to talk about social structure as the arrangement or pattern among the parts of a society, without specifying what these parts were (other than individual human beings) and how the patterns were formed. Attempts to

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