LEVELS OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The word “structure” comes from the Latin verb *struo*, to join together, build, arrange, or order. *Struo* is related to the Greek verb *stornymi*, to spread smooth or level (Rosen 1980: 32). Etymologically, structures are constructed unities that exhibit an internal architecture by virtue of having their component parts smoothed out into levels by the reticulating operations of analysis and synthesis. When these operations are performed over the domain of social relationships, intergroup relations, and social institutions, the result is an analytical model of the levels of social structure. By “levels of social structure” one means the layered demarcation of the elemental and supervening components of a complex association (however defined analytically) into a series of units of increasing scale and complexity. The differentiated and/or encompassing elements, units, and relations constitute a social ontology offered up as a template for further analysis, explanation, and theoretical integration.

Levels of structure can be found in all the sciences. In biology, the series runs as follows: molecule, cell (subsuming cellular organelles), organ, organism, population, species, community, and biotic environment. Each level incorporates the prior one as its working parts in a new relational configuration, and exhibits new emergent properties as a consequence of their dynamics. Although many scientists believe that analysis “cuts reality at the joints”—making levels of structure the ontological building blocks of the world—levels schemes undergo dramatic revision over time. Even determining the number of levels is problematic. In the biological series above, some scientists consider cellular organelles a level and population a sublevel, while others see a confusing mixture of two series, the genealogical and the ecological. Particularly in the social sciences, it is wise to think of levels epistemologically—as analytical efforts to break a complex whole into articulated parts until a base of interacting elements is fixed by postulation.

Levels talk in the social sciences ranges from indistinct hand-waving to well-ordered models of the levels of social structure. The latter efforts hue closely to the implicate order of the biological series above. Most begin with a postulated analytical primitive (either an element or a process) that gives rise to the smallest unit of social structure, which is then "aggregated" or "compounded" into the complete series. Alternatively, the most comprehensive unit is demarcated first and the series unfolds by subdivision. Few concepts qualify for this kind of treatment. The most common are family, territory, role, system, and social relationship. Mixed series may represent synthetic efforts or reveal analytical confusion. A metatheoretical literature now exists to evaluate levels schemes (Kontopoulis 1993; Luhmann 1995). Successful efforts accomplish the following tasks. They

- Demarcate the major units and levels of structure of theoretical interest (the social ontology)
- Explain the emergence of more complex units from the dynamics of the antecedent level(s) (upward structuration)
- Describe the internal relations, processes, and systemic effects at each level (system dynamics)
- Explain how antecedent units are transformed by being integrated into more complex units (downward structuration)
- Use the levels scheme in the explanation of social facts.

Five groups of models of the levels of social structure, thirteen models in all, will be presented next. The thirteen were selected for their heterogeneity, influence, and ability to illustrate metatheoretical issues. Levels schemes that include social structure as a level of reality without decomposing it into sublevels unique to itself will be omitted from consideration, as will be idiosyncratic schemes that incorporate dialectical or dualistic elements or combine vertical and horizontal planes (e.g., Gurvitch 1950). For a discussion of the relationship between levels talk and theory integration, see Ritzer (1981).

1.1 *Household, village, polis*: Aristotle, *Politics,* 335-322 B.C.

1.2 *Family* (household), *gens* (a descent group like a clan), *phratry* (a union of several *gentes*), *tribe*, and *polis* (city-state): N. D. Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, 1864. Mechanism: Federation through religious rites.

Aristotle understood that the household and village were *transformed* by being incorporated into the polis: The household's constitutive relations—identified by Aristotle as master and slave, husband and wife, and parent and child—were in the polis subject to new principles of justice. Today this transformative process is called "downward structuration" (Kontopoulis 1993). Finding in ancestor worship the wellsprings of the patriarchal authority and social solidarity that were generalized from one level to the next, Fustel de Coulanges showed how the universalism of the polis allowed new kinds of association such as the guild to form. In rites of consecration he identified a key mechanism of "upward structuration."

1.3 *Horde, family or house, clan, tribe, nation*: Lewis Morgan, *Ancient Society*, 1878. Mechanism: Partitioning due to population pressure.

Virtually the same series as Fustel's, but geared to the anthropological record and postulating the existence of a formless, sexually promiscuous "horde" as the primordial whole from which the family first emerged by subdivision. As analytical devices, levels schemes strive to multiply units composed of the same basic substance. The driving force behind them is logical order, however, not descriptive accuracy. The horde, which Emile Durkheim recognized as a theoretical fiction, is a classic case of analytical postulation. Variations of Model 1.3 can be found in Durkheim, Henry Sumner Maine, and Herbert Spencer, all of whom saw segmental social organization giving way over time to territorial organization and the ramiform division of labor.

2.1 *Vill, hundred, shire, kingdom*: Anglo-Saxon England.

2.2 Commune, canton, district, department: Post-Revolutionary France.

2.3 Precinct, ward, municipality, county, state, federal government: American federalism.

Juridical and administrative jurisdictions enclose one another in scope and authority while preserving the relative autonomy of the encapsulated units. Once in place, political parties (and other large-scale corporate groups) can align their units into the prevailing territorial structure. The Chinese Communist Party, for example, organized itself from center to periphery as follows: Central committee, regional committee, district committee, and village-level party branch. The last was divided into five groups of cadre, each with its own leader, working in the local peasants' association, the women's association, etc. One can hardly imagine social structure today in the absence of such intra-organizational relationships as diocese and parish, national headquarters and local chapter, and corporation and subsidiary. Nevertheless, social theorists treat territorial jurisdiction as a constitutional backdrop to social organization. They include it as a structural principle or resource, but concentrate on the inter- and intra-organizational dynamics allayed along its spine. Because political and administrative offices are implicated in hierarchies of caste, class, and estate, some analysts treat territorial unit structures as vehicles of social stratification.

2.4 *Domus* (household: headed by a *paterfamilias*), *vicus* (village: priest), *civitas* (city: bishop), *provincia* (district or principality: archbishop), *communitas totius orbis* (Christendom: Pope): The theocratic order of the *corpus mysticum Christi*, 12th century.

While piggybacking off the territorial-administrative organization of feudal Europe, this ecclesiastic hierarchy overlays a temporal order with a spiritual one, for the purpose of controlling the former normatively. It represents a paradigm for levels schemes that terminate in an immaterial realm of forms or values that, in some fashion, guides or patterns the social series ascending toward or descending from it.

3.1 *Famille*, c*ollege* (association of three or more persons of like status), *corps* (union of several *colleges*), *communauté* (local community), *république* (commonwealth): Jean Bodin, *Six livres de la République*, 1576.

3.2 *Familia, collegium* (unitary body or corporation), *civitas* (community), *provincia* (province, governed by an assembly of the estates), *republica*

(sovereign state): Johannes Althusius, *Politica*, 1614. Mechanisms: Contract and consent.

Two mixed types of levels scheme. Although both rejoin the territorial scheme of the sovereign state, their heightened emphasis on voluntary associations anticipates the emergence of civil society. *Colleges* include guilds, trading associations, and synagogues, while *corps* amount to federations of such entities extending across provinces. Althusius occasionally proclaims that the supervening units spring from a social compact among delegates representing the units on the prior level.

4.1 *Role*, *collectivity*, *institution*, *society*: Parsons' (1959) "four levels of structural organization."

4.2 *Societal values, institutional patterns, collectivities, roles*: Johnson's (1985) "four levels of social structure."

The most widely adopted levels scheme in postwar American sociology. Many sociologists still equate macro-sociology with the analysis of institutions, and define institutions as an implicate order of organizations, groups, and status-positions such as lawyer and client. This scheme is significant in three respects. First, by making "social institutions" the penultimate level of social structure, it liberated structural analysis from the inclination to privilege either kinship or territorial unit structures. Intermediate levels of structure reside *within* institutions, and the number of levels depends on how authority is delegated in each one. Second, the relative equality of institutions differentiates social structure *horizontally* as well as vertically, evoking the image of a catalog of collectivities displayed in coordinate space. Third, the analytical primitive is a patterned set of social actions, a role, not something decomposable into persons. Since roles are comprised of norms, the entire series can be recast as a descending specification of immaterial forms or values, as Model 4.2 illustrates. Both models envelop the social series in a formative cultural one, following Parsons' cybernetic hierarchy of behavioral, personality, social, and cultural systems.

5.1 *Exchange relations, network structures* (sets of connected exchange relations), *groups* (network structures organized for collective action), *corporate*

groups (hierarchies of groups incorporated in a division of labor): Cook and Emerson (1984).

5.2 *Social relationships, social networks, intra-organizational relations, inter-organizational relations, societal stratification, the world system*: Prendergast and Knottnerus (1994)

In Model 5.1 network structures arise from power-balancing operations in exchange relations, groups from coalition formation in "negatively-connected" exchange networks, and corporate groups from "productive exchange" in "positively-connected" network structures, which centralizes power. The distinction between positive and negative connection has been shown by David Willer to be an artifact of experimental procedure. Without that interior scaffolding, Model 5.1 make cuts as qualitative as those in Model 5.2. The latter, a synthetic effort, begins broadly with social relationships, then veers toward political economy, in effect positing the polity and economy as primary institutions. Model 5.2 terminates in the open environment of the world system, rather than in a bounded totality called society.

Social structure has always been understood as a phenomenon of levels. The prevalence of levels talk in the history of social thought indicates the power of analysis to disarticulate, smooth out, and unify the domain of observations, interventions, and reflections on patterned social interaction called the theory of social structure.

Like any simplifying device, models of the levels of social structure can occlude as well as amplify perception. While the paradigm of the implicate order—the series of Chinese boxes of greater scale and inclusiveness—has had a long run, many doubt its applicability to the fluid processes of relationship-formation evident in society today. The most popular metaphor for the implicate order today, "nesting," suggests an untidy articulation, with significant overlaps between planes. In "messy and refractory" social structures, Harrison White argues in *Identity and Control* (1992), "there is no tidy atom and embracing world, only complex striations, long strings reptating as in a polymer goo, or in a mineral before it hardens." White draws upon polymer chemistry for metaphors to

describe the evolution of the units of social structure he calls disciplines, ties, institutions, and styles. While occasionally calling these "levels," White's main point is the obsolescence of the original, architectural metaphor of levels.

Fashioning alternative metaphors matters less to other critics than analyzing social structures as accomplishments of knowledgeable human agents who discover, implement, and legitimate structural principles of hierarchy, incorporation, and/or loose coupling. This subjective point of view has yet to open up the black box of actors' levels talk, or its derivatives in social theory.

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