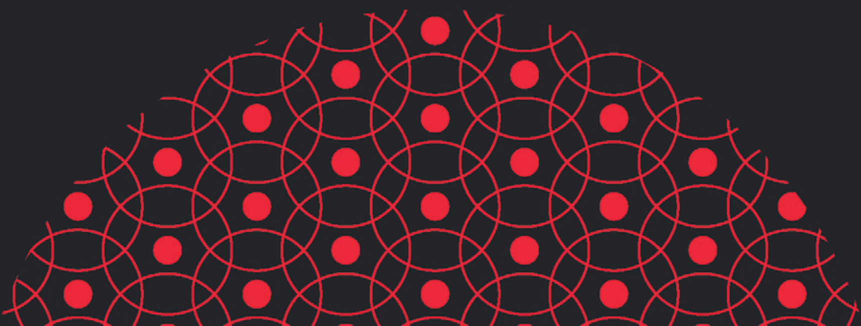
STRUCTURE AND SOCIAL ACTION

On Constituting and Connecting Social Worlds

JOHN SCOTT



STRUCTURE AND SOCIAL ACTION

This page intentionally left blank

STRUCTURE AND SOCIAL ACTION

On Constituting and Connecting Social Worlds

BY

JOHN SCOTT
Plymouth University, UK

United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2022

Copyright © 2022 John Scott. Published under exclusive licence by Emerald Publishing Limited.

Reprints and permissions service
Contact: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying issued in the UK by The Copyright Licensing Agency and in the USA by The Copyright Clearance Center. Any opinions expressed in the chapters are those of the authors. Whilst Emerald makes every effort to ensure the quality and accuracy of its content, Emerald makes no representation implied or otherwise, as to the chapters' suitability and application and disclaims any warranties, express or implied, to their use.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80262-800-5 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-80262-799-2 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-80262-801-2 (Epub)

ISOQAR
REGISTERED

ISOQAR certified
Management System,
awarded to Emerald
for adherence to
Environmental
standard
ISO 14001:2004.

Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

CONTENTS

List of Figures vii
Preface and Acknowledgments ix

1. How Is Social Structure Possible? 1
    Structure, Structuration, and Morphogenesis 3
    Collective Action 8
    Social Structure as Virtual Structure 12
2. Interaction, Social Worlds, and Figurational Structures 19
    Routine Grounds of Social Interaction 22
    The Interaction Order 28
    Figurational Structures and Social Networks 36
    Conclusion 43
3. Institutions, Practices, and Formational Structure 47
    The Ontology of Emergent Structures 48
    Institutions, Practices, and Parts 52
    Theorising Formational Structure 54
    Modelling Formational Structures 63
    Conclusion 68
4. Integration, Contradiction, and Conflict 71
    Social Integration and System Integration 73
    Social Conflict in France 75

Bibliography 83
Index 101

This page intentionally left blank

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1.	A Virtual Circle.	12
Figure 1.2.	Levels and Elements of Social Structure.	16
Figure 2.1.	A Figurational Structure.	34
Figure 2.2.	Figurational Structure of the Norton Street Gang.	35
Figure 3.1.	A Formational Structure.	51
Figure 3.2.	The Overall Social Structure.	52
Figure 3.3.	A Blockmodel and Its Image Graph.	66
Figure 3.4.	A Formational Structure Produced through Blockmodelling.	67
Figure 4.1.	Key Events in French History.	76

This page intentionally left blank

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My concern for the relationship between social action and social structure was first ignited when I read Talcott Parsons's *Structure of Social Action* as a student in 1968. This demonstrated clearly the interdependence of the two ideas and the ways in which this recognition pointed the way towards a comprehensive theoretical understanding of social life. A reading of David Lockwood's articles on system thinking showed how Parsons's insights could be built upon and the complexity of social structure could be understood. David's work, and my correspondence with him before I became a colleague at Essex University in 1994, was a constant source of inspiration for my investigations into social structure and social action.

The particular ideas developed in this book were first set out in a short book written with José López at Essex and published in 2000. These ideas were subsequently developed in discussions with Dave Elder-Vass, whose publications explored the construction of social structure and its emergence from social interactions. The underlying assumption of these discussions with José and Dave was that the oft-cited divergence between action and structure is fundamentally unfounded. There is no way that either idea can properly be understood in isolation from the other. Social structure is nothing other than a product of social action, but action itself is necessarily structured by social processes. Despite the persistent denials of this, I hold firmly to it being a self-evident conclusion to draw. This book develops the foundations for this conclusion.

The book grew out of chapters written at the invitation of Håkon Leiulfsrud and Peter Sohlberg for their books *Concepts in Action* and *Constructing Social Research Objects* (Brill, 2017 and 2021). In addition to the intellectual debts that I owe to David Lockwood, José López, and Dave Elder-Vass, I am grateful to Cambridge University Press for permission to reprint Figure 6.13 from *Generalized Blockmodelling* (Doreian, Batagelj, and Ferligoj, 2005) as my Figure 3.4.

This page intentionally left blank

1

HOW IS SOCIAL STRUCTURE POSSIBLE?

For much of its history, social structure has been seen as a defining concept for sociology as a discipline, and until the late twentieth century many regarded Talcott Parsons as its principal theorist. Parsons's major work, *The Structure of Social Action* (Parsons, 1937), argued that social structure must be seen in relation to the companion concept of social action. Parsons held that the ideas of the leading classical theorists could be synthesised into a compelling theory of the structures that sustain social life. Max Weber's view of social action and Emile Durkheim's view of social structure, in particular, he saw as providing the foundations for a powerful social theory. It was on these foundations that Parsons built his influential structural–functional and system theory. Even his critics were agreed, for the most part, that the ideas of Weber and Durkheim – perhaps with the addition of those of Karl Marx – provided an appropriate way to conceptualise social structure as the product *of* and condition *for* social action. Action and structure, then, were widely regarded as complementary elements in the sociological imagination, seen as forming, respectively, the 'micro' and 'macro' aspects of social life. This point of view was the 'orthodox consensus' of mainstream sociology in the 1950s and 1960s (Atkinson, 1971, Ch. 7; Giddens, 1979).

This orthodox consensus was not unchallenged. An ongoing dispute between 'methodological individualists' and 'methodological collectivists' raged around the issues of whether individual actors could be conceptualised apart from their social identities and social structures could be seen as social realities in their own right (see, for example, the arguments brought together in O'Neill, 1973). From the middle of the 1960s, however, a growing number of critical theoretical perspectives began to pose more radical challenges to both the classical sociologists and to Parsons's post-classical work, arguing that action (or 'agency') and structure had to be seen as involving diametrically

opposed theoretical approaches and that sociologists must choose between them (Dawe, 1970, 1979). The arguments of the methodological individualists were elaborated in interpretative theories of action, such as symbolic interactionism and those rooted in hermeneutics, existentialism, and phenomenology. These theories stressed the importance of qualitative methods of ethnographic observation and direct interviewing as ways to 'understand' the subjective meanings and motivations of actors (Outhwaite, 1975). The arguments of the methodological collectivists, on the other hand, were developed in a variety of approaches rooted in structuralist, post-structuralist, and some forms of Marxist theory. These theories stressed the use of formal and mathematical methods as ways to 'explain' large-scale structures and their historical transformations.

Sociological debate began to fragment into the open intellectual warfare between theorists of action and theorists of structure that Alvin Gouldner (1970) foresaw as the 'coming crisis' of Western sociology. For some commentators on these disputes, this crisis marks the break-up of sociology and, perhaps, a fragmentation of social life itself: 'the end of the social' means that there is no need for sociology at all (Baudrillard, 1978; see the recent discussion in Vandenberghe & Fuchs, 2019).

This diagnosis of doom was not universally accepted. Anthony Giddens (1976b) was an early counter-critic, arguing that classical and contemporary theoretical approaches could be reconciled if the radical 'dualism' between action and structure is rejected and they are re-theorised as complementary elements in sociological analysis. His argument was that action and structure are interdependent: actions produce, reproduce, and transform structures, while structures constrain, facilitate, and condition actions. Each can be explored separately, through a limited 'methodological bracketing' of any concern for the other, but they remain complementary elements in any comprehensive social theory. Giddens (1984) went on to explore this complementarity, or 'duality', in his synthetic theory of the 'structuration' of social life.[1] In a similar vein, Margaret Archer (1995) synthesised action and structure in her theory of 'morphogenesis'. Other leading advocates of the need to combine 'micro' and 'macro' perspectives were Karin Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel (1981) and Jeffrey Alexander (Alexander, Giesen, & Richard, 1987), while Jonathan Turner (2010, 2012) proposed a more complex amalgamation of micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of sociological investigation.

1 A useful critical discussion of Giddens's argument that makes some useful comments on his concept of structure is that of William Sewell (2005, pp. 124–151).

These varied arguments for theoretical synthesis have returned to the very concerns that had inspired Parsons in the 1930s. Their arguments are, however, programmatic and incomplete. Giddens, for example, gave rather more attention to his re-conceptualisation of action than he did to developing the concept of structure. Archer gave more attention to social structure, but failed to articulate a concept that could convince the protagonists of the action-*versus*-structure dualism to abandon their entrenched positions. It remains the case that, for many theorists and commentators, the mere mention of the word 'structure' is taken to imply that the debates of the last 50 years are being ignored and that the alleged errors of the orthodox consensus are being repeated. My aim in this book is, optimistically but not I hope foolishly, to sketch a way in which these arguments for synthesis can be carried forward through a reconstruction of the orthodox consensus on a more secure foundation. In doing this, I hope to show the basis for intellectual cooperation and for a renewed spirit of confidence in the past and future achievements of sociology.

STRUCTURE, STRUCTURATION, AND MORPHOGENESIS

To achieve my goal, I must first explore the various ways in which social structure has been understood, and misunderstood, in order to develop a more convincing concept. I can then show how, so conceptualised, such social structures can be seen to be both an outcome *of* social action and a condition *for* social action. I shall develop and complete the arguments of Giddens and Archer by showing that an understanding of the processes through which social structures are built – termed, respectively, structuration or morphogenesis – is a theoretical task that was, in fact, satisfactorily completed long ago. The radical advocates of both action theories and structural theories have lost sight of what was once a sociological commonplace.

Social structure was originally conceptualised by an analogy between the structure of a society and the skeleton of an organism, the biological framework to which its various organs are attached to form a 'functional', physiological system (Schäffle, 1875–1880; Spencer, 1873–1893). This idea of the 'social organism' has been criticised for implying that a social structure must have a substantive existence separate and distinct from the social actions of the human beings who are its constituent elements. The obvious fact that a social organism is neither observable nor tangible in the same way as a biological organism and its skeletal structure led many to argue that the very idea of

social structure ought to be abandoned. This was certainly the view of Max Weber (1904), who rejected all 'functional' and 'system' ideas as invalid elements for his sociological methodology. The response of many structural theorists to such criticism was to resort to a much weaker terminology and to refer to social structure simply as the 'pattern' or 'arrangement' of social activities. This argument has the virtue of avoiding the criticisms levelled at the biological analogy, but it leaves unspecified exactly where, or indeed how, such a pattern might be said to exist. This conceptual failure made it all too easy for critics and advocates alike to see social structure as a mere methodological convenience, invented by theorists, that has no reality beyond the theories in which the term appears.

However, a closer reading of the key texts shows that the argument was not so vacuous. The 'pattern' that constitutes social structure was typically seen as a pattern of norms and relations that are understood to be real features of social life (López & Scott, 2000; Scott, 2001, 2011, 154ff). Norms, formed into institutions, are 'templates' for the actions that appear as recurrent relations and practices and are the means through which social actions are shaped, facilitated, and constrained. This recognition dissolves the problem of 'what' social structure consists of – it consists of norms and relations – but it leaves unanswered the equally important problem of 'where' these norms and relations are to be found. I will return to this second problem shortly, but first I must show how such a structure is related to social action.

Parsons (1937, p. 46) held that social action, as it was understood by Weber (1920, pp. 4–5), is the essential starting point for any explanation of social structure. Social action, he argued, comprises the interaction of one actor with another. This interaction is organised by the subjective, 'normative' orientation that each actor takes towards the other. Norms are the rules or principles, conscious or unconscious, that actors acquire through their socialisation and through which they devise a definition of the situation that guides their actions and reactions as they interact. Interaction, then, is 'structured' by norms to which actors subscribe. Norms, together with the actual relations in which they become involved, comprise the structure of the situation within which action takes place.

This means that actions can never be seen as the actions of abstract 'individuals' but are always situated actions taking place in a structural context. Individuals encounter each other as actors with a particular identity or social position that orientates them towards others in situationally specific ways. For this reason, social action was defined by John Stuckenberg (1898) and Georg Simmel (1908) as 'sociation'. Thus, individual actors always relate to each other as a son, friend, lover, work mate, churchgoer, gay, Asian, and so on.

This does not, however, imply that there must be consensus between actors as to which identity it is appropriate to enact in any particular situation. Similarly, the identity adopted by one actor may not necessarily correspond to that held of her or him by others (Hughes, 1945; Scheff, 1967). The crucial point is simply that interaction necessarily involves some kind of mutual positioning.

Actions can be seen as falling into two broad types according to the particular norms that form the actor's orientation (Scott, 2011, 182ff). What Weber called the purposive-rational type is action pursued as an instrumental or strategic project, drawing on technical norms that require an emotionally neutral and narrowly specific cognitive orientation to the situation. In this case, situational objects and other actors are seen in universalistic terms, as resources that have the capacity to do or to achieve something desired by the actor. Weber's value-rational type of action, on the other hand, is that in which actors are oriented to value commitments and norms of diffuse emotional engagement and is undertaken in highly particularistic terms on the basis of information about its worth in terms of a set of values. Such actions may typically be pursued ritualistically (Collins, 2004).

Conscious, reflexive actions are relatively uncommon. The norms that define an actor's identities and positions may often lie below the level of conscious deliberation, and much of what actors do becomes a matter of habit. Norms acquired through socialisation become deeply embedded below the level of conscious awareness and subsist in memory traces or engrams produced by neurophysiological processes. Such socialised dispositions, learned and reinforced through practice, comprise the actor's habitus (Bourdieu, 1972), a complex of taken-for-granted routines that allow everyday behaviour to proceed with minimal thought and deliberation. This everyday behaviour is what Weber referred to, rather misleadingly, as 'traditional' action governed by long-established habits.

It is, then, conscious and habitual normatively oriented actions that produce the social structures that comprise the conditions under which future actions take place. However, this view, central to the orthodox consensus, is precisely what many of its critics have rejected. Their rejection has been based upon a claim that the idea of a structure makes sense only if it is something that exists separately from the individual actors. This criticism does not apply, however, if a structure is regarded simply as the pattern apparent in social activity. This view makes it possible to recognise that action and structure require each other as elements in a comprehensive social theory.

This insight is central to the arguments of Giddens and Archer, but both authors also recognise that the mutual constitution of action and structure in processes of structuration or morphogenesis has always been central to

sociological thought. Most notably, it was Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson who developed the argument that the social structures of an economy comprise ongoing and recurring processes of interaction. They argued that a division of labour, a distribution of commodities, and class divisions are structures that are the unintended consequences of those purposive-rational actions organised as market relations. On this basis, they held that the overall structure of economic and political relations in a society is the result of human action but not of human design (Ferguson, 1767, p. 122). Once built, social structures become constraining and facilitating forces that shape human action as if a 'hidden hand' were at work (Smith, 1766, p. 50). As Norbert Elias later put it, a society 'has a history which takes a course which has not been intended or planned by any of the individuals making it up' (1939). It is within this unplanned structure that subsequent actions must take place.

This view was, of course, also the basis on which Marx argued that

> *The social structure and the State are continually evolving out of the life-process of definite individuals … as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will.*
>
> *(Marx & Engels, 1846, pp. 46–47)*

Social structures are encountered by the members of a society as the given conditions under which they must act and so:

> *Men [sic.] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.*
>
> *(Marx, 1852, p. 15)*

Actions are socially, and so historically, situated within definite relations and are contrived and performed on the basis of the cultural 'tradition of all the dead generations' (Marx, 1852) into which they have been socialised. The cultural tradition shapes the thoughts and creative, innovative projects that actors carry out under the given material conditions that enhance or confound their ability to achieve them. Subsequent work by Edward Tylor (1871) and later anthropologists showed that the culture of a society comprises the language, ideas, and values through which actors define their situation and infer the norms that are relevant to their actions. Cultural norms shape actors' orientations and inform the projects they pursue. The material circumstances – the physicality of their environment and of their own bodies, together with the

equally material constraints inherent in their relations with others – shape those actions by setting limits and opportunities to what can be achieved.

These were the ideas that informed Archer's account of morphogenesis. Her argument is that agents exercise their creativity within a physical environment and a social structure of norms and relations that exert their causal powers over human agents and their projects as those agents interpret their situation and cope with the conditions they face (Archer, 1995, pp. 157–158, 192–194; 2003, p. 133). Archer recognises, however, that actors typically act in relation to their immediate goals and with only partial knowledge of the cultural and material conditions under which they act. Their actions, therefore, set in motion a whole chain of actions and reactions with ramifying consequences that cannot be foreseen and may be so far removed from the initiating actor that they are unknown or only partially glimpsed (Archer, 2003, p. 140; Merton, 1936; Giddens, 1976a). These unintended and often unknown consequences of action shape the relations among actors and the physical conditions under which they conceive and undertake their subsequent actions. These actions, in their turn, have further ramifying consequences. Social life, then, comprises an ongoing series of overlapping and interweaving action chains with multifarious consequences that are of such density and complexity that their structure is impenetrable to the actors, who can act only on the limited and partial information available to them. The co-occurring and compounding consequences of action comprise, therefore, 'a social process that goes on behind the backs' of the actors (Marx, 1867, p. 135).

Social structures are both reproduced and transformed through such ongoing actions and their unintended consequences. Smith and the classical economists explored only the stable 'equilibrium' outcome of purposive-rational economic actions. Under competitive conditions, it was argued, a series of adjustments to changing conditions within a particular market will eventually result in a stable balance between the demand and the supply of a commodity. Repeated across the economy, through interdependent markets, this results in equilibrium levels of employment, investment, and other economic measures. Of course, it was recognised that this complete equilibrium is only a tendency of the system and that real economies are likely to show a 'moving equilibrium' in which disequilibrium in particular markets and unanticipated disturbances bring about a constant process of adjustment that moves the system towards a structural equilibrium state that may never actually be achieved. The achievement of later theorists such as Durkheim has been to show that there can be similar outcomes when actions motivated by value-rational orientations produce complexes of interaction such as religious practices and collective rituals. However, all these theorists recognised that it is

by no means inevitable that an equilibrium state will be achieved. Where structuration processes work against each other or there is a degree of instability in the physical environment, it is quite possible for a social structure to develop in unintended directions that result in structural transformations or even complete structural breakdown.

COLLECTIVE ACTION

My argument so far has developed as if it is only the actions of individuals that produce social structures. But, of course, actors may cooperate in forms of joint action, forming teams of actors with a degree of cohesion and solidarity that ensures the capacity to engage in collective action. Actors capable of concerted action, 'collective actors', have been central to many theories of social conflict. Marx emphasised the development of classes as the conflicting forces that produce structural change (Marx, 1852; Marx & Engels, 1848), Ludwig Gumplowicz (1883; see also Le Bon, 1895b) saw the conflict of ethnic groups as central to social change, and Weber (1920) devised ideal types of household, religious, political, and economic collectivities and of the forms of conflict and cooperation in which they engage. This awareness led to pioneering accounts of organised interest groups, parties, and pressure groups (Bentley, 1908; Small, 1905) and eventuated in theories of interest groups (Dahl, 1971; Kornhauser, 1959) and organisations (Etzioni, 1961). Later theorists explored the larger 'conflict groups' that arise from the more loosely organised classes (Coser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1957; Rex, 1961). It is important to examine the diverse forms of organised action and collective actors in ongoing process of structuration.

When individual actors come together, coexist, or are similar in some respects, they form an 'assemblage' of potential interactants. Where the actors in an assemblage are oriented to each other in such a way that their joint actions can be coordinated as a collective effort, they begin to acquire the capacity to act as a single entity (Domingues, 1995, p. 148; Elder-Vass, 2010, Ch. 7). They associate more frequently and intensely and build 'enduring dispositions' that allow them to coordinate their actions closely towards each other or in respect of each other, so becoming a 'collectivity' (Nadel, 1951, p. 165). A collectivity, then, is an assemblage able to engage in more or less unified and coordinated activity and to pursue distinct patterns of action (Sprott, 1958). In a fully developed collectivity, individuals may occupy normatively defined positions of leadership and task performance that give