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Social Structure

Manuel Antonio Garretón and Nicolás Selamé

INTRODUCTION

The concept of social structure has been one of the most important in the social sciences. Because of its relevance, its meaning has been the subject of debate between diverse disciplines. While political science tends to consider social structure as it affects political dynamics, in sociology it has been a central object of study since the beginning of the discipline. This has led to several points of convergence and dialogue between both fields, since the comprehension of social structures can partially help to understand political phenomena, but can also lead to mistakes due to the reduction of political conflicts to the influence of social structure, or their 'sociologization' (Sartori, 1969). Nevertheless, in its conceptualization of social structures, sociology has always considered implications of political phenomena in one way or another, without necessarily reducing the focus simply to the consequences of social structures. This chapter discusses problems of social structure, from the perspective of sociology, and their consequences for politics.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE: THE SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH

The concept of social structure in sociology varies as widely as social theories in general. It has been of concern since the beginnings of the discipline, even though it has not always been used in the same way. Taking the most general approach, according to Giner et al. (2006: 311), it can be said that social structure in sociology refers to 'the most permanent, the basic, the non-apparent and maybe hidden, the framework or maybe the logical shape of something'. After this first vague delineation, the authors point to at least five different concerns in sociology's structural problematization: (1) the structure-agency relation; (2) the static and dynamic aspects of structures; (3) the distinction between analytical and concrete structures; (4) the descriptive-explanatory conception of structure; and (5) the structure–culture relation (ibid: 311).

The first dimension of the problem concerns the micro–macro dichotomy, where it must be discerned whether a phenomenon depends on particular elements (the agents) or on long-lasting context characteristics (the structure). This tends to be the most important subject when talking about structure in sociology. The second dilemma refers to the conception of structure as an immovable, steady component, or as a dynamic factor of social changes (the motor of history of Marxism is an extreme example). Third, it must be discerned whether a structure has distinguishable characteristics that allow its isolation from others in a concrete empirical way or whether it is a purely analytical category that cannot be separated from other elements (e.g. economic and political structures that can be differentiated from others only analytically but in fact interact in many ways). The fourth point refers to Levi-Strauss' concept of structure as a theoretical framework to understand the elements of society that determine the actions of subjects, but the objective existence of which cannot be assured. The fifth dimension deals with the contrasts and interactions of the concept of structure in relation to that of culture. The assimilation of both is present mainly in the Parsonsian tradition, where it is assumed that culture assigns roles to actors and therefore determines structures. In the perspective that opposes structure and culture, the first is related to objective aspects (from demographic characteristics to social groups as classes or nations), while culture is understood as a 'subjective' dimension of social life. In some schools, the debate around these concepts is open – as in Marxism, where some oppose culture and structure while others consider culture as one of the structures of society.

These are the problems most frequently dealt with in the treatment of social structure in sociology. This does not mean always considered in each theory that they are the most problematic aspect in the discussion, these problematic dimensions of structure can be traced.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGY

One initial conception of the structure is Durkheim's ideas on the basic rules which he explains as the rules of sociological method. When he describes facts', he refers to them as social facts having power by virtue of which, wishes it or not, they impose upon him' (Durkheim, 1982: 51). Notice that in this brief statement Durkheim's sociology is the subject or the agency that can emerge from these facts – not relevant – neither for the discipline nor for the course of society. What we understand society and its change is collective phenomena that transform individuals and impose themselves.

The main social structure changes that Durkheim attends to are specialization in the functions of society, which creates specializations between individuals (Durkheim, 1893). In other words, he looks to a society where the main processes are explained by this tendency of labor and the course this structure transition from traditional to modern societies is the main cohesive element in modern societies the structure of labor becomes most relevant cohesion. This is also a topic much discussed in the works of Karl Marx and Max Weber.