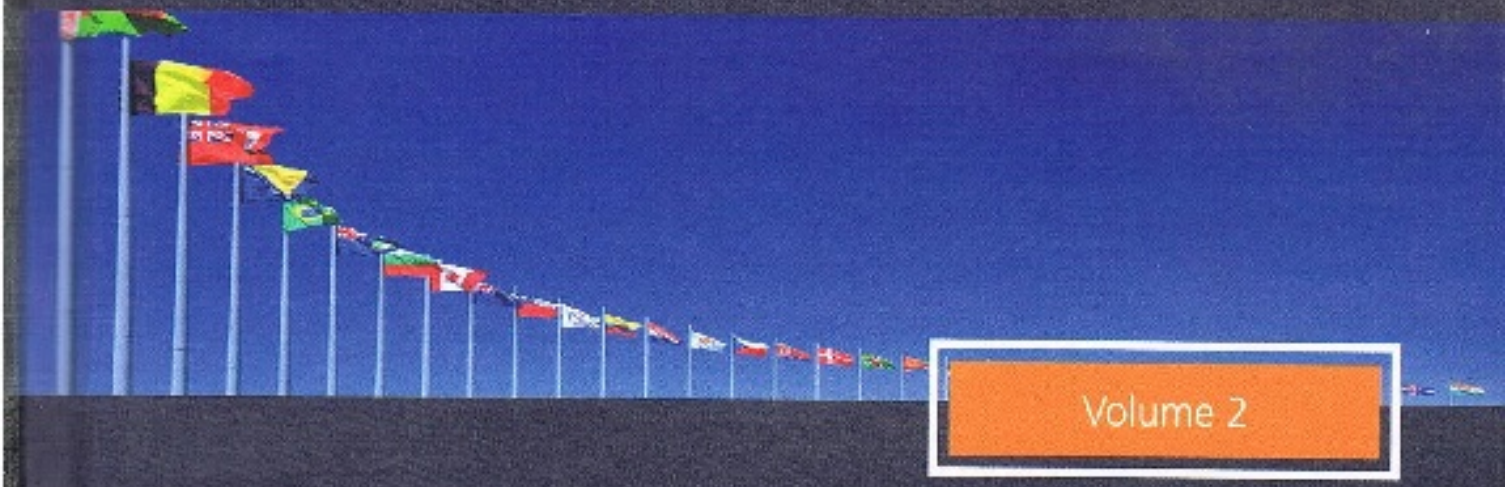
The SAGE Handbook of Political Science



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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 immutable, steady component, or as a dynamic factor of social changes (the motor of history of Marxism[1] 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 Parsonian 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 theor that they are the most problema the concept. In most of the theo cuss, these problematic dimensi structure can be traced.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGY

One initial conception of the structure in Durkheim's ideas em basic rules which he explains as sociological method. When he de facts', he refers to them as son affects a subject 'with a compelli cive power by virtue of which, wishes it or not, they impose upon him' (Durkheim, 1982: 51 noticed in this brief stateme Durkheim's sociology the subject or the agency that can emerge fro not relevant – neither for the dis for the course of society. What understand society and its chan collective phenomena that trans viduals and 'impose themselves'.

The main social structure chan Durkheim attends refers to the specialization in the functions of in modern societies, which create tions between individuals (Durkh In other words, he looks to a n society where the main processes are explained by that tendency of labor and the course this structure transition from traditional to mo ties that he describes is also an example of the problem mentio ously concerning the opposition and social structure. In traditiona culture is the main cohesive elem in modern societies the structur of labor becomes most relevant cohesion. This is also a topic mu