Social structure is one of the most central concepts in sociology. Yet there is wide disagreement about what it means. This disagreement is consequential because differences in the way sociologists conceptualize social structure lead to very different approaches to sociology. The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, because there is so much dispute about what social structure means or should mean, in the first part of this paper I will simply present without argument four different conceptions of social structure that are prominent in the field. Although the alternative conceptions I will examine are not necessarily exhaustive, they do represent what are probably the most commonly held views. Examining them, therefore, should significantly advance our thinking on this important but elusive concept. The second objective of this paper, which I will pursue in a subsequent discussion, is to make a case in favor of one of these four alternatives, namely one that traditionally has been associated with Marx.

As far as the views that will be considered are concerned, social structure refers to one of the following:

1. Patterns of aggregate behavior that are stable over time
2. Lawlike regularities that govern the behavior of social facts
3. Systems of human relationships among social positions
4. Collective rules and resources that structure behavior

The first conception is most closely associated with exchange theorists, notably Homans (1975), and some symbolic interactionists, but most recently has been given a strong defense by Collins (1981). Looking at Collins's defense in particular, I will argue that this conception leads to a methodological individualist approach to sociology that is ultimately unable
CRITICAL REALISM: ESSENTIAL READINGS

to explain a wide range of macrosocial phenomena such as deindustrialization, power and economic crisis. The second conception represents the view of the so-called Structural Sociologists—theorists like Blau (1970; 1977), Mayhew (1980) and Turner (1984). It fosters a holistic approach to sociology that, I argue, cannot achieve its own stated goals. In contrast with all of the other conceptions, the fourth does not conceptualize social structure in terms of organizational properties of social systems but rather in terms of shared rules. It is traditionally associated with ethnomethodologists, some symbolic interactions, and other sociologists who employ a linguistic model to conceptualize social structure. Recently, it has been most forcibly defended by Giddens (1979; 1981; 1984) with whom it is now distinctively associated. I shall argue that because this conception, like the first, ends up reducing the organizational features of society to an epiphenomenon of human behavior, it too proves unable to account for the range of phenomena we expect social structure to explain. The third conception interprets social structure as a causal mechanism constituted by relationships among social positions that accounts for social phenomena in terms of tendencies, strains and forces inherent in the nexus of those relationships. Most closely associated with the more traditional variants of the Marxian tradition, it also has adherents among symbolic interactionists and network theorists.

The four conceptions of social structure

Structure as patterns of aggregate behavior that are stable over time

Two of the most prominent theorists to define social structure as stable patterns of aggregate behavior are George C. Homans and Randall Collins. "As used by sociologists," says Homans (1975: 53), "'structure' seems to refer first to those aspects of social behavior that the investigator considers relatively enduring or persistent." Similarly, Collins (1981) defines social structure as "micro-repetition in the physical world."

From a microviewpoint, what is the "social structure"? In microtranslation, it refers to people's repeated behavior in particular places, using particular physical objects, and communicating by using many of the same symbolic expressions repeatedly with certain other people.

(Collins 1981: 995)

By microtranslation, Collins means the translation of all macrophenomena into microphenomena. "A microtranslation strategy reveals the empirical realities of social structures as patterns of repetitive micro-interaction" (Collins 1981: 985). Collins goes on to say that "strictly speaking, there is no
such thing as a ‘state’, an ‘economy’, a ‘culture’, a ‘social class’. There are only collections of individual people acting in particular kinds of microsituations – collections which are characterized thus by a kind of shorthand” (Collins 1981: 988). According to Collins, “The ‘state’ exists by virtue of there being courtrooms where judges repeatedly sit, headquarters from which police leave to ride in the same squad cars, barracks where troops are repeatedly housed and assembly halls where congresses of politicians repeatedly gather” (Collins 1981: 995).

Homans and Collins both advocate a reductionist approach to sociology, one that attempts to explain phenomena from the bottom up. Homans, of course, is well-known for his advocacy of methodological individualism. Collins does not go quite that far, but he too believes that “the dynamics as well as the inertia in any causal explanation of social structure must be microsituational” (Collins 1981: 990). In particular, Collins believes that all social phenomena, even the most macro, are built up by an ever expanding complex of conversational encounters, which he calls “interaction ritual chains.” Like Homans, Collins disbelieves in the objective existence of collective entities:

Social patterns, institutions, and organizations are only abstractions from the behavior of individuals and summaries of the distribution of different microbehaviors in time and space. These abstractions and summaries do not do anything; if they seem to indicate a continuous reality it is because the individuals that make them up repeat their microbehaviors many times, and if the ‘structures’ change it is because the individuals who enact them change their microbehaviors.

(Collins 1981: 989)¹

On this view, structure is defined in behavioral terms: In fact, structure is conceived as a form of behavior – stable or repeated behavior. Once structure is defined behaviorally, it becomes relatively easy to build the macro level up from the micro level. Microstructure consists of a few people repeating their behavior and macrostructure consists of a lot of people repeating their behavior. It also makes perfect sense why in the view of Homans and Collins the explanatory dynamic in social explanation must be at the micro level. Collins is certainly correct that if social structure is just an abstraction, social structure cannot be much of an independent variable; abstractions do not exhibit causal forces. Consequently, macrosocial structure is largely epiphenomenal. For that matter, microstructure is also epiphenomenal for the same reason. Since it is just an abstraction with no independent effects, it is not clear that structure is a very useful concept at all on this view.
Structure as lawlike regularities among social facts

The idea of social structure as lawlike regularities among social facts is traditionally associated with Durkheim and more recently with the school that has come to be called Structural Sociology (see, for example, Blau 1977; Mayhew 1980; Turner 1984). According to this view, social facts or group properties are related to each other by a pattern of lawlike regularities, which together constitute social structure. It follows that the job of the sociologist is to uncover those regularities through empirical observation and thereby describe social structure.

This conception of social structure leads to an approach to the discipline that is quantitative, positivist and sociologically holist. The approach tends to be quantitative because the regularities governing the behavior of social facts are generally construed to be relationships of what Durkheim called "concomitant variations." This means that quantitative variations in one social fact are related to quantitative variations in other social facts. The approach tends to be positivist in its assumption that the regularities are simply out there to be found without the aid of theory and in its strong affinity with the positivist covering law model of explanation. According to the covering law model, scientific explanation consists of subsumption under a law. For example, if there were a law specifying that if event A occurs, then event B must occur, then event B could be explained as a logical deduction from this law and the prior occurrence of event A. Of course, for the covering law model to work, phenomena actually need to be governed by such deterministic laws or at minimum by somewhat looser laws that at least specify invariant probabilities that the B event will occur (Porpora 1983; 1987).

Finally, this conception of social structure leads to a sociologically holist approach because it treats the behavior of social facts as a domain of phenomena that is completely autonomous of the psychological level. To see this, suppose there were a statistical law specifying that if group size increases by a particular amount, then there will be a 40 percent probability that group division of labor will increase by a particular amount. If such a law actually existed and if a group's size increased by the specified amount, then we could logically deduce that there is a 40 percent probability that the group's division of labor will increase by the specified amount without knowing anything that is going on at the level of the individual actor. If such a law existed, it would just make no difference to the science of sociology what was happening with the individual members of the group.

Because this conception of social structure rigidly divorces sociology from psychology, it represents social structure as something entirely devoid of the influence of human agency. On this sociological holist view, social structure operates mechanically and naturalistically over the heads of individual actors.
The conception of social structure as systems of human relationships among social positions is most characteristically associated with the Marxian tradition. The systems referred to are characteristically modes of production while the social positions referred to are class positions. The human relationships are class and intraclass relations such as domination, competition and exploitation.

Clearly, this is hardly the only interpretation of Marx’s conception of social structure, but it is a common and rather traditional one. I shall not attempt to show exegetically that it is the most faithful reading of Marx because my interest is more in the viability of this particular conception of social structure than in how closely it corresponds to Marx’s original texts. This conception of social structure is not even limited to the Marxian tradition. Among others, some symbolic interactionists and network theorists adhere to it as well. Patriarchies and racial modes of exclusion can also be viewed as systems of relationships among social positions, although here the social positions will be defined in terms of gender and race rather than class. On the micro level too, the structure of units such as the family can be viewed as a system of relationships – those linking the husband/father, wife/mother, and children, all of which are social positions.

Just as the second conception of social structure we considered is closely tied to the positivist philosophy of science, there is a strong affinity between the concept of structure as a system of human relationships and the post-positivist philosophy of science advocated by the so-called realists (Benton 1981; Bhaskar 1975; 1979; Harré and Madden 1975; Isaac 1988; Manicas 1987 and Secord 1983; Outhwaite 1987). According to the realists, the world is a complex composite of entities, each having its own causal properties, i.e., tendencies, forces, and capabilities. These causal properties in turn are a function of each entity’s internal structure. For example, by virtue of its internal structure, a table is causally capable of exerting a force upward that counteracts the force of gravity on objects placed on it. Similarly, because of our own more complex internal structure, we humans are causally capable of intervening in the world in a purposive way (Outhwaite 1987: 22).

It follows on the realist view that science has two tasks: to explain the causal properties of each entity in terms of its internal structure and to explain the occurrence of particular events in terms of conjunctures of the causal properties of various interacting mechanisms. Neither of these tasks involves the lawlike correlations among events that are so integral to the positivist covering law model of explanation. The first task does not even relate events but rather generating mechanisms and consequent causal properties. The second task explains events in terms of the operation of such causal properties, but since it is assumed that any causal mechanism can be
counteracted by others, there is no expectation that events themselves will be invariably related to each other.

A system of relationships among social positions may itself constitute just the sort of causal mechanism that the realist philosophers have in mind. Capitalism, according to a Marxian analysis, is a case in point. According to the Marxian perspective, the internal structure of capitalism causally generates certain deleterious tendencies, some of which eventually alter the very nature of the system. For example, the competitive relationship among capitalists leads to a decline in their number that ultimately results in a concentration of wealth and the transformation of capitalism from a competitive to a monopoly phase. It is also the competitive pressure of capitalist relations that leads to the overaccumulation of productive potential and consequent crises of underconsumption. And it is the conflict of interests built into the relationship between capitalist and proletariat that produces the fundamental class struggle in the system. In a realist manner, Marxian analysis thus attempts to explain the tendential properties of capitalism in terms of capitalism’s internal structure.

In contrast with the previous conception of social structure, this one is not a version of sociological holism. It does not portray social structure as something that operates over the heads of human actors. Instead, social structure is a nexus of connections among them, causally affecting their actions and in turn causally affected by them. The causal effects of the structure on individuals are manifested in certain structured interests, resources, powers, constraints and predicaments that are built into each position by the web of relationships. These comprise the material circumstances in which people must act and which motivate them to act in certain ways. As they do so, they alter the relationships that bind them in both intended and unintended ways.

Although this conception assumes that people are motivated to act on the interests structurally built into their social positions, the assumption is not a deterministic one. Interests always represent presumptive motives for acting, but actors may fail to recognize their interests, and even when they do recognize them, they may choose to act against them in favor of other considerations. However, since when actors fail to act in their interests they incur some cost, it is expected that actors generally will act in conformity with their interests. Even here, that does not necessarily mean that interests determine specific actions. Actors frequently respond to their structured interests in creative ways that in principle cannot be predicted in advance.

However they act, individuals affect the structural relationships that bind them in intended and unintended ways. Thus, according to this conception, there is a dialectical causal path that leads from structure to interests to motives to action and finally back to structure. The structural relationships and the various, often conflicting interests they generate are both the material conditions motivating action and the intended and unintended
consequences of such action. This sounds very much like Giddens’s well-known concept of the duality of structure. The crucial difference is in what Giddens means by structure. What Giddens means by structure are cultural rather than material conditions, and as we shall see in the discussion section, neither interests nor indeed any structured motive other than rule-following plays much role in Giddens’s account.

**Social structure as rules and resources**

The conception of social structure as rules and resources is now distinctly associated with Anthony Giddens, who elaborates his meaning of structure as follows:

> Structures can be analysed as rules and resources, which can be treated as ‘sets’ in so far as transformations and mediations can be identified between the reproduced properties of social systems.

(Giddens 1981: 26)

A distinction is made between *structure* and *system*. Social systems are composed of patterns of relationships between actors or collectivities reproduced across time and space. Social systems are hence constituted of *situated practices*. Structures exist in time-space only as moments recursively involved in the production of social systems. Structures have only a virtual existence.

(Giddens 1981: 26)

The distinction between Giddens’s conception of social structure and the one we just examined in the previous section is clearly drawn in the second passage cited above. According to the third conception, social structure consists of those patterns of relationships that Giddens refers to as social systems. For Giddens, such patterns of relationships do not themselves constitute social structure. Rather, for Giddens, structure consists of the rules and resources associated with those relationships.

According to Giddens, rules and resources “structure” (i.e., generate and reproduce) the systemic patterns of relationships we see. He says, for example, that “‘structure’ [i.e., rules and resources] refers to ‘structural property’, or more exactly to ‘structuring property’,” that reproduces the social system (Giddens 1979: 64). Thus, the difference between the third conception of social structure and Giddens’s is that for the third, structure refers to the actual organization of society – the distribution of income, the division of labor, etc., – whereas for Giddens, structure refers to an organizing principle behind the actual organization, namely rules and resources.

According to the third conception, the constitutive relationships of social organization themselves have causal properties. The poor, for example, are
constrained by the (relational) distribution of jobs in society or opportunity structure. In contrast, Giddens dismisses this conception of structure as naive (Giddens 1984: 16). He says that “Such conceptions are closely connected to the dualism of subject and social object: ‘structure’ here appears as ‘external’ to human action, as a source of constraint on the free initiative of the independently constituted subject” (Giddens 1984: 16). Instead, Giddens interprets social relationships in the same manner as Collins, that is as abstractions from our repetitive or routinized behavior (Giddens 1981: 26; 1984: xxiii, xxxi, 17). Thus, like Collins, Giddens denies that social relationships themselves have any independent causal properties. Of course, unlike Collins, Giddens does not tilt toward methodological individualism: he recognizes social mechanisms beyond the individual that generate and reproduce the relationships, namely rules, norms, ideology, and symbolic orders. In this regard as well, Giddens is something of a realist: for him, the rules, norms, etc., are all real causal mechanisms operating in the social world.

What Giddens does not embrace is materialism. The practical difference between Giddens’s conception of structure and the third relates to the causal significance of objective, social relationships and more fundamentally to the analytical priority of those relationships vis-à-vis intersubjective rules, norms, ideologies, and symbolic orders. At bottom, this is a difference between a materialist and an idealist approach to sociology. As we have seen, Giddens characterizes the third conception as portraying structure as something external to the agent, and I think that this assessment is correct. On the same construal, rules, norms, ideology and symbolic orders are all internal to the collectivity of agents as cultural constructs that are intersubjectively shared. Thus, on Giddens’s own rendering, we are talking about the difference between a concept of social structure as an objective reality and a concept of structure as an intersubjective reality.

To put this point another way, the rules, norms, etc. that Giddens considers to be structure all depend for their existence on their at least tacit acknowledgement by the participating agents. In this sense, they are not objective or material but cultural. Certain relationships, on the other hand, such as the relationship of people to job opportunities can exist across differences in norms or rules, regardless of whether or not any of the participating actors realizes that they are embedded in them (Benton 1981: 17). They thus represent objective, material circumstances external to the participating agents.

To give primacy to these material circumstances is not to embrace a reductive materialism in which human action is merely a deterministic reflection of material circumstances or in which human actors are mere “carriers of structure”. The trick is to develop a nonreductive materialism that gives primacy to the material without embracing determinism. That is what the third conception of social structure attempts to do. The trick is easy enough to accomplish once we abandon the positivist understanding of causality as
FOUR CONCEPTS OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE

involving deterministic laws. We can then speak of the causal force that people’s material circumstances exert on their behavior without making any deterministic claims about the ways in which that behavior is connected to those circumstances. We can admit the mediating role of ideology, norms, rules and symbolic orders while still maintaining an underlying connection between material circumstances and behavior.

For all of Giddens’s talk about the duality of structure and structuration, Giddens does not offer us a framework resolving the tension between the material (or objective) and the ideal (or subjective) realms. He does not offer us even a nonreductive materialism. The duality of structure and structuration both refer to “the mutual dependence of structure and agency” (Giddens 1979: 69), to structure as both the cause and effect of human action (Giddens 1981: 27). If by structure Giddens meant something objective and material, the duality of structure and structuration would indeed reconcile the material and the ideal in a satisfactory way. However, as we have seen, by structure Giddens is essentially referring to rules, which belong as much to the subjective realm as agency. Thus, the duality of structure and structuration mediate only among different elements of the subjective realm and do not touch base with material circumstances. ³ It is largely for this reason that many of Giddens’s critics have accused him of subjectivism (Callinicos 1985; Johnson et al. 1986; Turner 1986).

Discussion

I will begin the discussion with the second conception of social structure because I do not want to devote much space to it. I have criticized this position extensively elsewhere (Porpora 1983; 1987), and space prevents me from repeating myself. Here, I will simply sketch the argument that I think is decisive against it.

The search for lawlike connections among social facts capable of supporting explanations conforming to the covering law model is futile because as even the proponents of this enterprise concede (Blau 1970: 335–336; Mayhew 1980: 363), connections among social facts are mediated by intervening processes involving individual actors. The problem is that the behavior of individual actors does not conform to laws, not even to statistical laws. Thus, the relationships between the social facts connected by those intervening processes on the individual level cannot be lawlike either.

Consider, for example, the putative relationship between size and the division of labor that Structural Sociologists spend so much time on. Again, the Structural Sociologists concede that the relationship between these two variables is mediated by intervening processes involving individuals; the structural sociologists simply choose not to look at these intervening processes. However, given this concession, in order for there to be a lawlike relationship linking size and differentiation, size would have to affect individuals in some
lawlike way, and the individuals so affected would have to respond in lawlike ways relating to differentiation. But since individual human behavior is not governed by such laws – not even statistical laws, the mediating processes involving individuals will not connect size and differentiation in a lawlike way either.

In the absence of such lawlike regularities, the covering law model of explanation is inapplicable, and all the search for laws yields is a set of statistical generalizations. Since such statistical generalizations do not meet the criteria of the covering law model that the Structural Sociologists themselves want to employ, it is not clear that these generalizations have any explanatory status at all. Instead, in order to really explain the relationship between size and differentiation in any particular case, the entire causal process linking the two will have to be examined, including the intervening part of the process involving individuals. Once we recognize this, we see that the whole enterprise of sociological holism – explaining social facts entirely in terms of social facts with no reference to individual behavior – cannot but fail.

The first conception of social structure we considered, the conception of social structure as stable patterns of aggregate behavior, is also rather weak. As we have seen, it reduces social structure to an epiphenomenon of individual human behavior. It may not be immediately apparent that this is a mistake. After all, in his important book, *The Credential Society*, Collins (1979) manages to make a major contribution to our understanding of stratification apparently without reference to social structure. Instead, Collins explains how elite social positions come to be monopolized by various subcultures comprised of common conversational styles, topics and assumptions. Following Bourdieu, Collins refers to the ability to fit into such subcultures as cultural capital. Depending on the group, such cultural capital can be acquired through either informal socialization or through formal organizations specifically designed for that purpose such as preparatory schools for the wealthy or professional schools for physicians, lawyers and managers. According to Collins, it is the gatekeeping control that various subcultures exercise over key positions that makes the pattern of stratification what it is.

Yet, however great Collins's contribution is to our understanding of stratification, we still need to ask whether he provides for a full account of it. Does he even identify the most fundamental element? I would submit that the answer to both questions is no. In fact, the very power of Collins's account is predicated on the existence of a prior system of social relationships. To see this consider two questions: First, why is the cultural capital of some groups such as organizational elites more advantageous than that of others such as common laborers? And second, how are the groups with the more advantageous cultural capital able to exercise their gatekeeping control? The answer to the first question is wealth and power while the answer
to the second question is simply power. The question then is whether power is more properly construed as a behavior pattern or as a dispositional property inherent in a social position that is itself defined in relation to other social positions. If the latter view is more accurate, as I believe, then, once established, relationships are in an explanatory sense more fundamental than behaviors, and so the necessity becomes apparent for a more robust conception of social structure than Collins provides.

Collins believes that power and even social positions are mere abstractions of behavioral patterns (Collins 1979: 53, 59). Thus, according to Collins, power is simply an abstraction from the type of behavioral pattern that ensues when the more powerful interact with the less powerful. This, however, is a major mistake. It doesn’t explain why in formal organizations, for example, the boss exhibits the behavior pattern of the powerful and the subordinate the behavior pattern of the less powerful. Why isn’t it the other way around? The answer to that obviously is that the boss by virtue of his or her social position has certain prerogatives over the life of the person in the social position of subordinate. Those prerogatives include the abilities to fire, to promote, and to determine the pay and workload of the subordinate. The first point is that these abilities are not themselves behaviors but dispositional properties built into the social position of boss. Although these abilities never actually may be manifested, they are what explain the behavior pattern we see. The second point is that these abilities are dispositional properties of a social position (the boss) that only exists in relation to other social positions (the subordinates). In short, the power that explains whatever behavior patterns we observe is rooted in social relationships. It is for this reason that I say that the relationships are analytically prior to the behavior. (See Isaac 1988 for a more thorough critique of the behavioral approach to power along the same lines.)

Once we see that Collins’s theoretical conception of social structure cannot even fully support his own contribution to our understanding of stratification, it becomes further apparent that it cannot account for all sorts of other social phenomena we expect a strong conception of social structure to explain. For example, a focus on behavior patterns and in particular on the face-to-face behavior patterns – the interaction ritual chains – that Collins stresses, cannot explain capital flight overseas, corporate insensitivity to the environment, or the capitalist push toward technological innovation. The explanation for all that resides in the competitive system of relationships among capitalists that characterize capitalism.

Collins might argue that the relationship of competition is only an abstraction from the competitive behavior of the capitalists, which is the only thing we see, but this again would be a mistake. In the first place, even if this were true, it would not be an abstraction from face-to-face behaviors of the capitalists. The capitalists often compete with rivals they never meet. In the second place, we do not actually see people competing in the economy;
we see them going to the factory or office, operating machines, pushing papers or closing deals. We know these people are competing because we realize as they do that the various business organizations are locked in a zero-sum game in which one’s gain is another’s loss. It is this zero-sum nature of the collective pursuit, again a relational property, that explains whatever competitive behavior patterns we observe — not the other way around. Again we observe the analytical priority of relationships to behavior.

The force of Collins’s position comes from a certain nominalism. Collins does not believe in the objective existence of collective entities like nations, classes or relationships; he believes that these are only abstractions from aggregate patterns of behavior. As he says, quite legitimately, none of these things exists except insofar as they are instantiated by particular people behaving a certain way. In saying this, Collins evidently wants to avoid the problems with collective entities associated with structural functionalism. Again, that is a legitimate concern, but the logical problem with structural functionalism was not the positing of collective entities but the attribution of an illicit teleology to those entities that is properly ascribed only to agents like human beings (Agassi 1960; Turner & Maryanski 1979).

Collins’s mistake is his nominalist assumption that only particulars are real. Following Collins’s argument, we could say that human beings are only abstractions; in reality human beings are only billions of individual cells interacting with each other. Of course, we could continue to make this reductive argument until we arrive at elementary particles. At that point, however, a surprise awaits the reductionist. The findings of modern physics are clearly that at the level of rock bottom reality, relationships are more real than particulars (Barbour 1966; Davies 1984). As one physicist puts it, “An elementary particle is not an independently existing unanalysable entity. It is, in essence, a set of relationships that reach outward to other things” (H. P. Stapp; cited in Davies 1984: 49). The point is that if even physicists have come to recognize the objective existence of relationships, there is no reason for sociologists not to do so where warranted as well. As I have tried to argue, it is warranted.

Finally, let us turn our attention to Giddens’s notion of structure as rules and resources. Here, it must be conceded that rules and relationships go together. In fact, to use Giddens’s terminology, we might even say they are recursively related. Rules establish social positions that are related by differences in power. People in those social positions then use whatever power they have to change the rules in intended and unintended ways. This recursive process predates all individual actors and probably goes back to the origins of our species. As Bhaskar (1979) notes, human actors do not so much create society as recreate it in each generation. However, although rules and relationships go together, they are different. The question is which has analytical priority, rules or relationships. Giddens gives analytical priority to rules and in fact denies that the relationships of a social system have any causal
FOUR CONCEPTS OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE

properties independent of the rule-following activity of human actors. In the remainder of this section, I will argue that relationships do have such independent causal properties and, moreover, that such relationships, once established, are analytically prior to the subsequent rule-following behavior of actors.

The simplest place to consider the causal properties of relationships among social positions is the culture of poverty debate. At issue in that debate was why the poor remain poor. On one side were the culture of poverty theorists who attributed the persistence of poverty to cultural factors, to the resocialization of each new generation of poor people into rules and norms and ways of thinking that perpetuate their poverty. On the other side of the debate were those who attributed the persistence of poverty to the objective circumstances of the social position the poor find themselves in. One feature of these objective circumstances is the absence of the cultural capital to which Collins has called our attention. This essentially involves a reference to the distribution of resources, which Giddens also acknowledges. However, another feature of the objective circumstances of the poor relates to the distribution of jobs or social positions in society. Specifically, the poor stay poor partly because they do not have access to good jobs or even to jobs that although probably not good are stepping stones to better jobs. In theoretical terms, what we are talking about here are relational properties of a social system—the relationships of social positions (jobs) to each other and to space. We are talking, moreover, of the causal effects of those relationships on the life chances of the poor. Ultimately, we are talking of those relationships as precisely the sort of external constraint on action, the existence of which, as we have seen, Giddens wishes to deny. Giddens of course talks quite a bit about the distribution of systemic relationships over space, but, significantly, he talks about them largely as effect and not as cause. The causal role of objective relationships has no place in Giddens's core concepts of the duality of structure or structuration. Thus, to whatever extent there is merit in the objectivist position in the culture of poverty debate, Giddens's silence on the causal properties of objective relationships is a serious lacuna in his theory.

That lucuna is present as well in Giddens's treatment of domination. According to Giddens (1979: 93–94), domination is based on rules of authorization and allocation. By authorization, he means “capabilities which generate command over persons,” and by allocation, he means “capabilities which generate command over objects” (Giddens 1979: 100). The question is who or what possesses these capabilities. It is not individuals qua individuals that possess these capabilities but rather individuals as incumbents of social positions. In other words, these capabilities are attached to social positions. They are in a sense the causal properties of those social positions.

It is not clear whether Giddens would deny the last point. Indeed, in some places, he seems to accept it (Giddens 1979: 117). However, if Giddens does accept that qua capabilities or resources, causal properties are deposited in
social positions, then, since social positions only exist in relation to each other, this is tantamount to accepting an independent causal influence of systemic relationships on behavior, which is something that Giddens apparently does want to deny. (Benton 1981: 17 makes a similar point in relation to Bhaskar.)

The major thrust of Giddens's structuration theory, however, is that such social positions are just an abstraction from the rule-following behavior of actors. Giddens suggests that domination resides in the interactive behavior and that this behavior reconstitutes the domination by its reaffirmation of the rules through which it occurs. The problem is that rules make their entrance at two points in time, which Giddens conflates. For example, the positions of boss and subordinate in an organization are certainly established by powerful actors at one point in time by formal, constitutive rules. Those rules give the boss the capabilities of firing, promoting and otherwise affecting the well-being of the subordinate. The rules thereby create a relationship between the position of boss and the position of subordinate that grants certain causal powers to the boss that allow the boss to dominate the subordinate. At another point in time, the positions of boss and subordinate are filled by actual incumbents.

If we now want to analyze the interaction of the incumbents of these positions, the question is which is analytically prior, the established relationship into which they both have entered or the rule-like, routinized manner of the interaction they subsequently establish. It seems clear that the relationship and the causal powers it affords the boss are what predominantly determine the character of the subsequent interaction. Much of that interaction is not even rule-like. The rules don’t usually tell the subordinate that he or she has to endure the angry outbursts of the boss or always stay at work long after quitting time just as the boss does. It is the subordinate’s recognition of the causal powers inherent in the position of boss that makes him or her act that way. Of course, such behavior can become rule-like and routine and thus reaffirm the authority of the boss, making it easier for him or her to dominate the subordinate. But even here what is being reproduced or reconstituted by the emergent rules is not the underlying power relationship itself; that is secured by the original, formal, constitutive rules that established the relationship in the first place.

We thus have to distinguish three things: the original constitutive rules that establish relationships of domination, those relationships themselves, and the tacit, informal rules that emerge when people enter those relationships and begin interacting. Because Giddens (1979: 66–67) conflates the first order of rules with the second, he obscures both the intermediary, causal role of relationships in his treatment of domination and the analytical priority of such relationships to the subsequent rule-like behavior of actors that emerges when they are placed in those relationships.

Among the causal powers that are deposited in social positions are
FOUR CONCEPTS OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE

interests. Interests are built into a social position by the relationship of that position to other positions in the system. To return to an earlier example, capitalists have an interest in maximizing profit because they are in a competitive, zero-sum relationship with all others occupying the position of capitalist. Here again, as something built into a social position by a web or relationship, interests confront the actor as an external force. Interests are a force that expresses itself in actors’ motives and, through motives, in their actions. In other words, actors are motivated to act in their interests, which are a function of their social position. Again, this doesn’t mean that actors always with necessity act in their interests, but if they don’t they are likely to suffer. A capitalist who shows no concern to maximize profit is liable to cease being a capitalist.

It is hard to know how Giddens can accommodate this point while denying the causal influence of systemic relationships. It is not even clear that Giddens would want to accommodate it. He speaks of structure as constraining or enabling, but never of it motivating. Giddens’s actors do not seem to be motivated to do much beyond follow the routines that reproduce the system. The problem is that many systems, like capitalism, never reproduce themselves exactly; they are ever changing as a result of the consequences of actors’ actions. Consequently, actors in those systems are routinely responding in nonroutine, nonrule-like ways to altered circumstances. What motivates them to respond in the ways they do? Giddens’s concept of structuration and the duality of structure do not answer this question.

Conclusion

Because of the difficulty in articulating what social structure means, one major objective of this paper was simply to identify clearly some of the most prominent alternative conceptions. A second major objective was to comparatively evaluate them. Here, I argued that the conception of social structure as patterns of aggregate behavior is too weak because it reduces structure to an epiphenomenon of human behavior and consequently ignores the independent causal forces inherent in structural systems. The conception of structure as a system of lawlike regularities among social facts is strong but untenable because there is no prospect of finding sufficiently strong regularities to play a role in the covering law model of explanation to which this conception is closely tied.

My argument with Giddens’s conception of structure as rules and resources is essentially that what it identifies is cultural structuring rather than social structuring. By this, I mean that it refers to the structuring of our behavior by culture as opposed to social relations. I am prepared to admit that culture structures and shapes our behavior in the ways that Giddens describes. I do not want to confuse this with what I consider to be the more fundamental structuring of our behavior by social relations, the occurrence of
which Giddens apparently does want to deny. The prospect of such confusion is very real since as Giddens (1979: 64) himself admits, it is as social relations that structure ordinarily has been understood in Anglo-American sociology. The whole culture of poverty debate, for example, counterposed structure, understood as social relations, to culture in explaining the persistence of poverty. That debate cannot even be conceptualized in terms of Giddens’s understanding of structure, and even here I am forced to use other terms such as social relations to explain what I mean.

The way Giddens has shifted the meaning of structure goes largely unnoticed. I think that is unfortunate because as I have tried to argue, the arrangement of social relationships in the world, however they came to be in the first place, is now analytically prior to rules, norms and ideology in explaining our current predicament. I still believe that the term structure should be reserved for that referent.

Notes

1 Collins (1988) has recently softened this position somewhat, but he still maintains that relationships are abstractions. As he puts it, “I see no ultimate objection to attributing as much reality-status as Meinong’s Golden Mountain to the Parsonian value-system or the nation-state... Idealizations, illusions and ideologies can play a part, but mainly as things to be explained, not as the ultimate explanations” (Collins 1988: 242). According to Collins, the ultimate source of sociological explanation is still the co-present interaction of individuals.

2 By agency, I mean human purposiveness and all that that entails such as wants, beliefs, desires, emotions, etc. Similarly, when I speak of the psychological level of analysis, I am referring to the level of individual actors and the mental states that properly are only attributable to them.

3 On the micro level, Giddens does sometimes refer to material circumstances such as the physical properties of the body and of location. Although important, such considerations represent only a slight nod in the materialist direction, and when Giddens turns his attention to the macro level, material circumstances play virtually no role in his analysis.

4 I owe this distinction between cultural and social conceptions of structure to Kyriakos Kontopoulos of Temple University.

References


FOUR CONCEPTS OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE


355