Structure and Agency and the Sticky Problem of Culture*

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The concept of social structure is crucial in social analysis, yet sociologists' use of the term is often ambiguous and misleading. Contributing to the ambiguity is a tendency to imply the meaning of "social structure" either by opposing it to agency or by contrasting it to culture, thus reducing "structure" to pure constraint and suggesting that "culture" is not structured. Even more damaging is the tendency to conflate these two contrasts. To add to the confusion, these contrasts are often mapped inappropriately onto other dichotomies prevalent in social theorizing, including material versus ideal, external versus internal, static versus active, and objective versus subjective, to produce a conceptual prism in which structure, agency, and culture are all poorly understood. This article attempts to disentangle these concepts from the aforementioned system of contrasts, to specify the connections between structure and agency, and to make a case for the inclusion of culture in the sociological conception of social structure.

The phrase "social structure" is ubiquitous in the sociological literature, and its meaning is foundational for much of the work that sociologists do. As Sewell (1992) points out, while this phrase generally denotes the resilient patterns that order social life, beyond this rather vague conception the exact meaning of social structure is the object of much variation and (usually implicit) debate. Although most sociologists recognize the concept as slippery and contested, it continues to be used in ways that are often ambiguous and misleading. Such imprecise usage, in turn, may inappropriately condition the way in which sociologists study and make sense of the social world.

Contributing to the problem is the fact that "social structure," like many sociological concepts, is often defined by contrast: its meaning then becomes dependent on the concept which it is set against. One of the more prevalent forms of contrast is that between "structure and agency." In this formulation the interconnections between structure and agency are lost. Further, this contrast is often mapped onto another set of dichotomies common in social theorizing and interpreted to mean, for instance, that structure is systematic and patterned, while agency is contingent and random; that structure is constraint, while agency is freedom; that structure is static, while agency is active; that structure is collective, while agency is individual.

Another central recurring contrast in sociological theorizing is that between "culture and social structure" (e.g., Berger 1991; Geertz 1973; Kane 1991; MacLeod 1987; Swidler

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1986; Wuthnow 1987).[1] The key problem with this usage, of course, is its implication that culture is not structured. Additionally, this contrast is also often entangled in a set of dichotomies that produce, for example, an image of social structure as objective and material, while culture is subjective and ideal; of social structure as hard, while culture is soft; of social structure as external, publicly-accessible, and open to scientific observation, while culture is internal, hidden, and requiring interpretation.

Taken together, these practices can easily lead to a quagmire of conceptual confusions. Not only do they create misleading renditions of these crucial concepts but since, as Sewell notes, "the term structure empowers what it designates" (1992, p. 2), in the aforementioned contrasts structure is treated as the concept with the muscle, while agency and culture become its weak-kneed younger cousins. Even more insidiously, the two contrasts are often conflated (implicitly or explicitly), and culture and agency are simply assimilated to each other, sharing their opposition to structure as conceptual underdogs.

My purpose here is to elucidate this system of contrasts, consider the ideological commitments and distinct conceptualizations of social life they embody, and elaborate on the confusions they create. Thereafter, I argue for a conception of structure as more than a pattern of material, objective, and external constraints engendering human passivity; for a conception of agency as more than action that is un-structured, individual, subjective, random and implying absolute freedom; and for a conception of culture as a part of social structure.[2]

TALKING PAST EACH OTHER

In discussions of structure, agency, and culture, social analysts seem to regularly talk past each other. Although the phrase social structure tends to be treated as if its definition is consensual and no explication is necessary, the actual use of the term varies widely. Gusfield (1981), for instance, refers to social structure as "institutions"; in Skocpol's (1979) view it consists of the relations between states, between classes, and between state and class; to Berger (1981) it means material circumstances; for Bellah et al. (1987, p. 6) it is said to include such features as the economy and the state; Geertz equates it with "political instruments," "institutions," and the "power element" (1973, pp. 331, 337); and for Willis (1977) it is the system of "production." Not only are these definitions quite distinct, they all neglect or deliberately exclude culture and therefore point to a common and sticky problem.

While some theorists (especially anthropologists) treat culture as *the* structure ordering social life (M. Douglas 1975; Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Levi-Strauss 1974; Sahlins 1976; also see Schwartz 1981), many others (especially sociologists) treat culture as something *distinct* from social "structure." Often connected to this separation of culture and social structure is a tendency to *link* culture to agency (e.g., Alexander 1987; Berger 1981, 1991; Parsons 1968; Skocpol 1979; Swidler 1986; Thompson 1966; Willis 1977).

Sociologists' reluctance to treat culture as a social structure stems, in part, from three

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[1] Both Geertz and Wuthnow treat culture as a "structure," it is simply not the same as *the* "social structure." Although these two theorists thus take an important step, their retention of the unfortunate distinction between "structure" and "social structure," allows others to maintain the contrast between culture and social structure. To that extent, the definition of social structure remains murky, and culture remains the term with less conceptual power.

[2] Sewell (1992) discusses these issues usefully in a recent piece which demonstrates that we share a concern with the vague use of the concept of social structure and with the position of agency and culture relative to it. Explicit, systematic contemporary treatments of these same issues can also be found, for instance, in Giddens (1984) and Alexander (1987). While these discussions have been quite useful to me, my approach is distinct and therefore, I hope, may further contribute to this conversation.

historically prominent sources in Western sociology. First, a simplistic base/superstructure reading of Marx and Engels (e.g., 1978) might lead one to an understanding of culture as purely epiphenomenal. Second, the influence of Parsons (1968) might lead some to equate the internalization of shared culture with "voluntarism" (and with something like a "defense" against "material" forces that impinge on the individual). Finally, a positivistic social science view might lead one to conceive of culture as pure thought, free-floating, without a concrete material existence, subjective, individual, private, and inaccessible to "scientific" analysis (see Bernstein 1978). In each case, culture is treated as the weaker counterpart to more *solid* structures and their constraints. And in the latter two cases, culture may be one-sidedly attached to the realm of agency which, in these formulations, appears as a measure of freedom from external, material constraints.

Further problems arise with reference to the issue of agency. First, when social theorists use structure and agency as contrast terms (agency is what structure is not, and vice versa), they neglect the interconnected nature of the two. In line with this, on the one hand, are those conceptions of structure that focus on its constraining nature and fail to recognize its empowering aspects (e.g., Bowles and Gintis 1976; Foucault 1978, 1980; Simmonds 1989; Willis 1977). On the other hand, there are those conceptions of agency that treat it as the creative, contingent, and therefore (implicitly) un-structured component of social life (e.g., MacLeod 1987; Swidler 1986; Willis 1977). To complicate matters further, some conceptions of agency tend to limit it narrowly to individual choice (e.g., Alexander 1987; Becker 1981; Elster 1989), while others expand it to include human action in general (e.g., Blumer 1969; J. Douglas 1970; Garfinkel 1967; Giddens 1982, 1984; Mehan and Wood 1975).[3]

These conceptual ambiguities are often driven by powerful ideological commitments. In part, the long-standing confusions in defining the place of structure, agency, and culture in social life are connected to the fact that, in the history of our society, individual freedom and social order have simultaneously been treated as *equally* crucial ideals and as *competing* ideals. The modern West has surely lent the notion of human freedom, particularly *individual* freedom, a privileged status (witness the celebration of the cowboy, the hard-boiled detective, the free-floating intellectual, and Rambo bucking the system). And, as Berger (1984, 1991) argues, this may leave much of social theory mired in an ("irrational") commitment to the search for voluntarism. On the other hand, there is also a long history of concern for social order. The modern privileging of science, for instance, is due in part to its promise to pursue for us that order (see Bernstein 1978; Harding 1986; Taylor 1987). This means that many social scientists are bound to look for order, finding patterns, making generalizations, establishing laws, and thereby discovering the structured character of the social universe. Underlining the persistence of these competing ideals in social research, Alexander writes, "The study of society revolves around the questions of freedom and order, and every theory is pulled between these poles" (1987, p. 12). Insofar as the concepts of structure, agency, and culture become the poles between which theories are thus pulled, a number of problems arise.

The entanglement of culture in these ideological commitments is apparent in the implicit debate over celebrating internal, subjective, and creative "culture" on the one side, and preserving the scientific study of external, objective, observable "structures" on the other.

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[3] Thus, while "structuralists" often fail to treat the enabling features of structures with sufficient seriousness, "social constructionists" often fail to treat the constraining features of structures with sufficient seriousness. "Rational actor" theorists and utilitarians not only fail to pay adequate attention to the constraining features, but also tend to imagine the world in purely individualistic terms, believing they are discussing the freedom and agency of individuals in complete control of the social world, constrained only by the resources at their disposal (see discussions in Alexander 1987; Madsen 1984; Mansbridge 1990; Sahlins 1976; Wolfe 1989).

According to this logic, a "structural argument" is one attentive to the determinism of the "material" structure of social life—that is, a given set of social relations, natural resources, or identifiable economic and political institutions: structural factors that are (allegedly) "scientifically" observable and "objective" (e.g., Bowles and Gintis 1976; Marx and Engels 1978; Skocpol 1979; also see discussions in Bernstein 1978; Kane 1991; MacLeod 1987). "Voluntarists," on the other hand, are understood as opposing such "structuralists" by emphasizing the agency of human beings who tacitly understand and creatively choose the cultural values guiding their action (e.g., Alexander 1987; Blumer 1969; Garfinkel 1967; Mehan and Wood 1975; Parsons 1968; Thompson 1966; Willis 1977).[4] Within such misleading conceptual schemes, both culture and agency become confused with that which is internal, subjective, individual, and "ideal," and both are understood as the *only* sources of human empowerment. Human practices become separated from human thought, and economic and political systems are drained of their meaningful content.

If this logic is carried to its extreme, then agency, freedom, and culture become one and the same. At the pole of those who fetishize science and seek order above all else, agency and culture are potentially associated with a terrifying chaos that is beyond sociological comprehension, and structure is naturally lent a privileged position. Structural arguments are viewed as powerful and scientific, while cultural arguments are understood as weak and "merely" interpretive. At the pole of those who seek to highlight the novel, the magical, the un-determined elements of social life, this same set of formulations can be used to argue that culture is the creative realm of human choice, and a sharp focus on culture's potentialities is naturally understood as the appropriate course. From this point of view, a structural argument is overly deterministic, while cultural arguments are celebrated as those that demonstrate human freedom and resistance in the face of structural constraint.

If the concepts of structure, agency, and culture are mired in such historically shaped preoccupations, then, ironically, our competing understandings of voluntarism, determinism, and the nature of culture are themselves structurally conditioned. In light of the taken-for-granted quality of the meaningful elements underlying such disagreements, it is predictable that the quarrel is passionate and confused, and that divergent answers would appear as self-evident truths to the participants. To untangle these confusions, I will begin by sorting through the various ways of specifying the terms structure and agency, drawing out the thematic coherence associated with each concept, and making a case for a particular formulation of their characteristics and connections.

SPECIFYING STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

Although mightily contested in its particular content, the term "social structure" is nonetheless generally used to highlight those patterns of social life that are not reducible to individuals and are durable enough to withstand the whims of individuals who would

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[4] Although Alexander's (1987) work informs much of what I say here, he also tends to use an interpretation of Parsons that simultaneously confuses culture with voluntarism, and confuses agency with individual freedom. While he never precisely defines agency, in *Twenty Lectures* he notes, for instance, "voluntarism might be said to be exemplified by theories which see *individuals* as socialized by *cultural* systems" (p. 14, my emphasis). Just as it was for Parsons, the addition of *internalized* culture is what makes Alexander's theory "voluntaristic," since it allows individuals to "choose" the ends of their actions and to possess, as Alexander puts it, a "conditional freedom" which amounts to the "mediation of material constraint by subjective volition" (p. 239).

Also useful for understanding the logic behind the connection made between culture, individualism, and voluntarism are studies of subcultures and countercultures (e.g., Hebdige 1979; MacLeod 1987; Williams 1973). For instance, exemplifying the logic that understands culture as active, creative, and voluntaristic, MacLeod writes, "[People] *actively* respond to structural pressures bearing down on them and develop their own *novel* cultural practices and meaning" (1987, p. 20; my emphasis).

change them; patterns that have dynamics and an underlying logic of their own that contribute to their reproduction over time (albeit in slightly altered forms) (see Durkheim 1964, 1965a, 1966; Giddens 1984; Sewell 1992). Most theorists have a sense of what is structural as that which is hard and solid, like the girders of a building as opposed to the decorations on the walls, and as determining, independent variables rather than the lesser, intervening, and dependent ones.

If social structure transcends individuals, it in some manner conditions or determines their thoughts and actions in accordance with its pattern. Pure structural determinism, then, would mean that theoretically we could understand societies and history solely by reference to the pattern of social structure and without consideration of the specific interests and activities of the people within it; people would be considered as mere robots, programmed to conform to a structured pattern.

Such a notion of structure is (obviously) too rigid. Giving up this rigid formulation, however, does not mean that we must give up the notion of a pattern behind social life. The concept of structure might well be refined in three senses.

First, structures should be understood as the creation of human beings as well as the mold that they fit. Though often operating behind the backs or over the heads of human actors, social structures would not exist without their (willing or unwilling, conscious or unconscious) participation (e.g., Berger and Luckmann 1966; Giddens 1982, 1984). Capitalism, for instance, could not endure without the purposive actions of entrepreneurs, corporate leaders, bureaucrats, and workers. And while none of these people could possibly understand completely the entire system that shapes their behavior, it is a system that their ancestors actively created and that they themselves persistently recreate. People, in other words, produce certain forms of social structure at the same time social structures produce certain types of people.

Second, structures should be understood as enabling as well as constraining; they are the very basis of human power and self-understanding (Durkheim 1964, 1965a, 1965b, 1966; Giddens 1982, 1984; Weintraub 1974).[5] The system of gender stratification, for instance, not only constrains men and women to act in certain ways, it also gives them both a sense of identity and a secure position in the world (whether we like it or not). Systems of language not only constrain what is possible to think and how it is possible to think it, they also make the very act of human thinking possible, as well as providing us with a broad range of ways of thinking.

This point deserves to be underlined, since its logic is often incompletely understood. Simmonds, for instance, is not alone when he defines structure as "constraints, limits, [and] 'necessity,'" and posits its opposition to agency, which he defines as "creative or transformational power, [and] 'freedom'" (1989, p. 187). But structures not only limit us, they also lend us our sense of self and the tools for creative and transformative action, and thereby make human freedom possible. Durkheim articulates this paradoxical truism:

> [L]iberty is the fruit of regulation. Through the practice of moral rules we develop the capacity to govern and regulate ourselves, which is the whole reality of liberty (1965b, p. 54).

Without structures there are no rules. Without rules, there is no grounding for, and no direction to, one's personality, and therefore no possibility for conscious, purposive action.

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[5] These two features of social structure are most powerfully emphasized by Giddens (1982,1984) in his discussion of the "duality" of structure. Although Giddens thus makes a crucial contribution, he also tends to inappropriately conflate these two forms of duality (see especially 1982, pp. 36–37, and the criticism of this conflation in Weintraub forthcoming, ch. 8).

The girders of the building are *our* girders: they hold us up, they protect us from social calamity, and they make human social thought and action possible.

Third, as Sewell (1992) points out, there are different "levels" of structure, levels which can be understood in anthropological terms as more or less "deep." More specifically, we might think of the different layers of social structures as more or less hidden from everyday consciousness, more or less powerful in guiding human thought and action, and more or less durable in their resistance to change. All of this also means that structures are more or less open to intentional and unintentional human tinkering. In fact, one might argue that it is the very flexibility of some levels of social structure that contributes to the resilience of other levels.

A useful approach to agency follows from this refined conceptualization of structure. Agency explains the creation, recreation, and transformation of social structures; agency is made possible by the enabling features of social structures at the same time as it is limited within the bounds of structural constraint; and the capacity of agents to affect social structures varies with the accessibility, power, and durability of the structure in question. Sociologists' use of the term agency, however, is usually a bit more tendentious. Their intention is generally to proclaim loudly that people are *not* mere automatons habitually following a precise and all-encompassing pattern dictated by social structure. In this sense, agency always implies that an array of alternative forms of behavior are possible, and that people make (conscious or unconscious) *choices* among those alternatives.

Within this frame, agency can be understood in four ways, in ascending order of the degree of choice considered available to human beings. First, one can imagine that people are agents in that they are the carriers or instruments of social structures. Second, one can say that people make structures at the same time as structures make people: through everyday practices, the choices made by agents serve to create and recreate structures continuously. Third, one can argue that people are agents insofar as they make choices that have significant transformational consequences in terms of the nature of social structures themselves. Finally, one can imagine agency in the sense that human beings are in complete control of the social world; their only constraints are biology and the limited natural resources that the earth provides.

The first and fourth conceptions of agency can be eliminated altogether. The first is completely structuralist; the last, completely voluntarist. The first, imagining people as carriers of structure, amounts to no agency at all: human beings are mere minions sent out to do the bidding of structure. The history of social change belies this analysis. The fourth conception, that imagines people in complete control, is the argument of extreme individualists. Envisioning a world of individuals unhindered by socially structured realities, it is antisociological, completely neglecting the social bases of human thought and action.[6]

The second conception of agency emphasizes the fact that social structures exist and are maintained only through the interactional activities of individuals (e.g., Alexander 1987; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Blumer 1969; J. Douglas 1970; Garfinkel 1967; Giddens 1984; Goffman 1974; Mehan 1983, 1990). As Giddens puts it, "The structural

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[6] This fourth conception is assumed by some proponents of the "rational actor" model as well as by the older philosophical tradition that emphasizes "free will." The idea of an absolutely free will seems to me utterly romantic and without grounding, leaving one to wonder where the "will" to take *any* action might come from. And those rational actor theorists who view themselves as exalting human agency seem to be suffering from a misunderstanding of their own approach. The allegedly "rational" actor maximizing gain through constant single-minded calculation of efficiency and potential advantage appears to me, as she did to Parsons (1968) and Weber (1958), not as an agent at all, but as someone entirely controlled by an external structure of opportunities and constraints—caught in a meaningless (socially structured) iron cage.

properties of social systems exist only in so far as forms of social conduct are reproduced chronically across time and space" (1984, p. xxi). Capitalism, the centralized state, and the hierarchies of gender and racial inequality, for instance, all require the persistence of particular forms of social interaction. Does participation in these recurring forms of social interaction make people agents? A closer look at such interaction may be useful in answering this question.

In Mehan's (1990) analysis of a formal psychiatric examination in a mental hospital, the board of examiners *chooses* to define the patient's behavior as "insane," even though the patient forcefully pleads that he is "well" and that the institution is "hurting him." These examiners are certainly acting as agents in that they make a choice, but the choice they make is not a surprising one. The effect of their agency is to reproduce the ideology of insanity, to reproduce the patient's subordinate position, and to reproduce their own status as "experts" on psychological states. Their practices are surely constitutive of social life, but they are nonetheless essentially "reconstitutive" of social structures.

Even more paradoxical is Willis's (1977) examination of the ideas and behavior of a small group of working-class schoolboys who, as "agents," distinguish themselves from their conformist counterparts by misbehaving in school, and by refusing to embrace the school's achievement ideology. These "lads," as Willis calls them, are clearly agents in that they make social choices among available alternatives. In fact, part of the reason why Willis's account is so attractive is that it seems to be a demonstration of creative choices in the face of overwhelming odds. But, ironically, the choices made by these lads actually lead them out of school at the earliest opportunity and into a life of factory labor (or unemployment), and therefore ultimately mean that their options as adults are even more limited than they might have been otherwise. In other words, as Willis recognizes, the "agency" of the lads simply serves to reproduce and further solidify both their working-class culture and their own position as members of that subordinate class.

Are Mehan's examiners and Willis's lads mere minions of structure? No. Are they agents? In a technical sense, certainly. However, what they actually accomplish is the reproduction of existing social structures. Most of the time, in most places, most people simply "habitually" reproduce the prevailing pattern of social life. If they are reflective and make self-conscious choices, like Mehan's examiners, they hardly rock the boat. If they are "impolite," like Willis's lads, their actions have only relatively trivial consequences for the deeper structures of social life which, by and large, remain intact. Nonetheless, in this the second conception of agency, people are agents in that alternate courses of action are possible, and in that they make (conscious or unconscious) choices among an available set of structurally provided alternatives.

If we fully accept this image of agency, however, it is important to recognize that we are simply restating the point that structures are both the source and the outcome of human action. The sharp analytic opposition between structure and agency crumbles. The only difference between this definition of agency and human social action in general is that action in this case is not *purely* habitual and unreflective. Nonetheless, while this is as much a structuralist argument as it is a voluntaristic one, it does fruitfully avoid the reification of social structures. It makes sure that human beings remain present in the conceptualization, and it points to the *processual* nature of structures (which is precisely what Giddens (1984) means to do in calling his a theory of "structuration," and by emphasizing the ongoing connections between structure and agency). This type of agency might be appropriately defined as *structurally reproductive agency*.

Most of the time, however, social analysts are particularly interested in agents' power to produce social change. The third conception of agency, suggested by Lukes (1977, pp. 3–29), seems to me most fruitful in this sense in that it focuses on those human social

choices that have "non-trivial consequences"—that is, those actions that affect the pattern of social structures in some empirically observable way. It is in this sense that it becomes particularly meaningful to speak of social structures as human creations—the intended and unintended historical consequences of human thought and behavior. This type of agency might well be called *structurally transformative agency.*

Social revolutions, of course, are the most striking examples of structurally transformative agency (e.g., Hunt 1984; Lukes 1977, pp. 3–29; Sewell 1985). However, there is a broad continuum of such transformative agency; revolutions are not the only means of altering the nature of social structures. While the development of capitalist relations and the centralized state were not everywhere the result of revolutions, they were always the creation of identifiable groups who acted as agents under identifiable structural conditions. And, under different structural circumstances, Willis's lads, for instance, might well have gone on to create new structural forms. Moreover, the English working class did create a resilient working-class culture (Thompson 1966); middle-class Americans at the turn of the nineteenth century did create a whole new ideology of motherhood and a new social position for women (Cott 1977; Kerber 1986); youths have created distinctive new sub-cultures (Hebdige 1979); American working-class women did define a whole new world of "heterosocial amusements" (Peiss 1986); and the civil rights movement did permanently affect race relations (e.g., McAdam 1982). Although we should conceive of agency, then, as emanating from (and generally reproductive of) structural *processes,* in determining its transformational possibilities it is its structural *impact* with which we should be primarily concerned.

Agency, then, occurs on a *continuum* from the structural reproduction of Mehan's psychiatric examiners to the structural transformation of successful revolutionaries. This continuum is influenced by the depth and durability of the structural form in question, by the level of power held by those making the choices, and by the larger cultural milieu in which the choices are made (as suggested by Giddens 1984; Lukes 1977; and Sewell 1992). Technically speaking, people are agents on a daily basis. Structures, in this sense, are in the process of constant readjustment. Further, in view of the logical systematicity of structures, this constant readjustment at the surface level can potentially, though infrequently, lead to the possibility of change at a deeper level. Structurally transformative agency, in other words, is made possible under particular historical circumstances—when portions of what were once deeper social structures become particularly malleable and provide occasion for significant collective refashioning.

Both structurally reproductive and structurally transformative agency, then, can be understood as human social action involving choices among the alternatives made available by the enabling features of social structure, and made possible by a solid grounding in structural constraints. I use the term "choice" to denote agency because it directs our attention to the central point that is implied in all definitions of agency: alternative courses of action are available, and the agent therefore could have acted otherwise. The meaning of choice in this context, however, should be specified to avoid three pitfalls that are particularly prevalent in Western thinking. First, choice does not necessarily imply intentionality. Choices can be conscious or unconscious, with intended or unintended consequences. Second, although we tend to conceive of choices as individual decisions implying individual freedom, choices are *always socially shaped* and are also quite regularly *collective* choices. Finally, as its social nature makes clear, agency is not simply "noise" or the realm of incomprehensible contingencies. The choices that agents make are always within the realm of structurally provided possibilities, and are therefore *patterned* and comprehensible (though only rarely predicted). As Durkheim (1964, 1965b, 1966) points out, agency in this sense is not a matter of "pure will" or absolute freedom; instead, it is

the individual and collective autonomy made possible by a solid grounding in the constraining and enabling features of social structure.

Now that these tentative conceptualizations have been formulated, let me restate the main points that serve as the basis for my treatment of the sticky problem of culture. Social structures are durable systems, patterned by more or less flexible inner logics, that transcend individuals. Social structures are both the medium and the outcome of human social action: although they regularly operate above the heads of individual human actors, they would not exist without the willing or unwilling participation of those same actors. Social structures are simultaneously constraining and enabling: although structural constraints absolutely preclude the possibility of making certain choices, they also provide the basis of human thought and action, and therefore offer the very possibility of human choice. A sociological understanding of agency, then, does not confuse it with individualism, subjectivity, randomness, absolute freedom, or action in general, but recognizes it as embracing social choices that occur within structurally defined limits among structurally provided alternatives. Since social life is fundamentally structured, the choices made by agents usually tend to reproduce those structures. That reproduction process, however, is never fully stable or absolute and, under particular circumstances, the structured choices that agents make can have a more or less transformative impact on the nature of structures themselves. Human agency and social structure, then, have a simultaneously antagonistic and mutually dependent relationship.

THE STICKY PROBLEM OF CULTURE

As I have argued, culture is sometimes reduced to an epiphenomenal expression of the mode of production, the relations of production, or the relations between states and classes; is sometimes treated as a "mere" ideological legitimation of the material interests of rational profit maximizers; at other times is regarded as an insignificant, private, internal, subjective reflection of the public, external, objective world; or is sometimes reduced to "soft," infinitely malleable, "free-floating" ideas. All of these common and often unexamined usages are misleading and should be abandoned. Culture deserves to be disentangled from subjectivism, malleability, and "im-materialism."

Culture must be understood as a social structure if the term is to be *consistently* applied. Culture is a social, durable, layered pattern of cognitive and normative systems that are at once material and ideal, objective and subjective, embodied in artifacts and embedded in behavior, passed about in interaction, internalized in personalities, and externalized in institutions (see Berger and Luckmann 1966; Durkheim 1965a, 1965b, 1966; Geertz 1973; Parsons 1968; Wuthnow 1987). Culture is both the product of human interaction and the producer of certain forms of human interaction. Culture is both constraining and enabling. Culture is a social structure with an underlying logic of its own.

In conceiving of culture in this way, I argue that social structure consists of *two* central, interconnected elements: systems of social relations and systems of meaning. Systems of social relations consist of patterns of roles, relationships, and forms of domination according to which one might place any given person at a point on a complex grid that specifies a set of categories running from class, gender, race, education, and religion, all the way to age, sexual preference, and position in the family. Systems of meaning are what is often known as culture, including not only the beliefs and values of social groups, but also their language, forms of knowledge, and common sense, as well as the material products, interactional practices, rituals, and ways of life established by these. While not reducible to systems of social relations, culture matches the other central structure of social life in its power, its patterning, its durability, and its collective and transcendent

nature. If one wants to understand the resilient patterns that shape the behavior of any individual or group of individuals, *both* the cultural and the relational milieu must be taken into account. Structures, for instance, can constrain us ideologically by limiting our choices to those that are conceivable or acceptable, or can constrain us relationally by limiting the impact or efficacy of our choices regardless of what we may think or do (as implied by Lukes 1977, pp. 3–29). The history of social analysis makes it clear that these two systems always work together: social phenomena can never be fully explained by simply referring to one or the other. Nonetheless, systems of meaning and systems of social relations remain *analytically distinct,* as two aspects of social structure.[7]

Although this formulation is my own, it synthesizes useful insights from a number of prominent analyses of social life. It turns Marx on his side, as do Durkheim (1964, 1965a, 1966), Weber (1958, 1978), and Williams (1973). It is also derived from Giddens's treatment of "normative and cognitive rules" alongside "authoritative and allocative resources" as the central elements in his theory of structuration (1984, p. xxxi); from the emphasis on power and knowledge as the defining features of social life in the work of Bourdieu (1984), Foucault (1978, 1980), and Geertz (1973), among others; and from Mannheim's (1971, 1985) argument that the "field" in which a person thinks is shaped both by "what others have thought before him" and by his or her position in a system of social relations.[8]

Most recently, Sewell (1992), making use of the work of Giddens and Bourdieu, distinguishes between "cultural schemas" and "resources," and treats both as part of social structure. Although this formulation also furthers our understanding of social structure, and although Sewell attempts to elaborate the analytical distinctions between these elements of social structure in greater detail and at a higher level of abstraction than I do here, he also provides an example of some of the problems I wish to highlight. In his discussion of "cultural schemas" (as the patterns of principles guiding thought and action) and "resources" (as the systematic bases of asymmetries of power), he tends to entangle this distinction in the dichotomies of idealism and materialism, of "mental structures" and the "world of objects," of hidden and publicly codified, and of that which is "virtual" and that which is "actual." While Sewell himself seems to know better, one might interpret his analysis to mean that patterns of power are therefore observable, objective, publicly accessible, "real," and material, whereas patterns of culture are allusive, subjective, hidden, "unreal," and immaterial. This, I would argue, is a tortuous method of specifying the central elements of social structure.[9]

Another recent analysis by Kane (1991) further illustrates the propensity to entangle culture in a system of inappropriate contrasts. Using the example of the French Revolution,

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[7] These two social structures are so closely tied as to appear, at times, as one. The modern family, for instance, consists of a system of hierarchically arranged positions, at the same time as each of those positions is culturally defined and the relationships between family members are culturally shaped (e.g., Aries 1962; Zaretsky 1976). Capitalism is certainly a system of patterned relations of class domination. Yet, at the same time, class position carries with it class culture, and capitalism both supports and is supported by a system of meaning that values the rational calculation of self-interested gain above all else (see Polanyi 1944; Sahlins 1976). Nonetheless, systems of meaning and systems of social relations operate in ways that are theoretically distinguishable.

[8] This formulation is also borrowed in part from Jeff Weintraub, who cannot be held responsible for the ways in which I have developed it.

[9] A problem also arises in using the term "resources" to specify the basis of systematic asymmetries of power. First, because this formulation is enmeshed in Giddens's conception of the duality of structure, one might be led to confuse "resources" with the enabling features of structure, as the term seems to imply. Further, as Sewell recognizes, the resources of any given actor may be both relational *and* cultural; yet the logic of his argument could lead one to conclude that language, for instance, is *not* a resource. Finally, it seems to me that the production and distribution of resources actually *follows* from the systematic logic of patterned social relations. For these reasons, although my formulation of "systems of meaning" and "systems of social relations" as the central elements of social structure may be less analytically ambitious than Sewell's, I believe it has the virtue of more easily escaping these interpretive pitfalls.

Kane attempts to demonstrate that culture, "arranged in a logical pattern," with a "capacity to reproduce itself independent[ly]" (1991, p. 54), is a *structure,* empirically tied to but analytically distinct from "social structure."[10] While Kane has thus taken an important first step, she then proceeds to confuse culture with that which is immaterial, subjective, and arbitrary. For instance, in providing clues as to how one might distinguish cultural structure from "social" structure, she uses the contrasts "culture" versus "material circumstances" and "material versus ideal determination," and refers to "Weber's ideal and material interests" (pp. 55, 53, 59). Kane goes on to tell us that culture involves "subjective" meaning (rather than objective circumstances) (pp. 54, 67). Finally, she comments on the *"arbitrary* nature of symbolic representations and creation" (p. 58; my emphasis). In sum, Kane tends to view culture, either explicitly or by implication, as something *distinct* from material or objective reality, and to understand it as arbitrary, random, and therefore relatively *incomprehensible.*

Although it is unfair to single out Kane, I choose her because hers is an intelligent and useful analysis that nonetheless typifies a number of misleading, yet common, formulations. In guiding empirical research, these formulations can lead one down a crooked road, where greater precision might serve to straighten it. The notion that culture is arbitrary and objectively inaccessible would make many (sensible) social scientists hesitate to pursue an analysis of culture at all. For the intrepid few who might do so, the search for "ideal" and "subjective" culture could lead them to ignore the material and external forms of culture. By the same token, the assumption that culture is "arbitrary" and creative might well lead these brave researchers to disregard the patterned, systematic, and constraining nature of culture.

Culture is both internal and external, subjective and objective, privately held and publicly available, with a simultaneous "ideal" and "material" existence. When considering culture, the regularly cited oppositions between these terms become a good deal more fuzzy.

The term "material," for instance, in sociological parlance generally refers to what is scientifically observable, and is applied in three senses. First, it can be used to refer to what is "concrete"—e.g., the table, the spinning wheel, a telephone, or a building. Second, one can conceive of what is material as the scientifically measurable behavior of human beings as opposed to their more hidden, and less directly accessible thoughts. Finally, one might define the material world in Marxist terms, as the mode of production. These conceptualizations generally ignore the facts that most material objects are constructed first in the human imagination and are subsequently realized through meaningful activity; that action cannot be fully understood without reference to the "thoughts" which motivate and comprehend it; and that, while the mode of production is analytically distinct, it cannot easily be separated from the culture with which it is intertwined. Furthermore, if we take "material" to mean something with an objective, observable existence, how can we exclude the culture that is embodied in material artifacts (such as the written word and the painted canvas), crystallized in institutions (such as the church and the family), and embedded in mundane practices (such as the brushing of one's teeth) as well as in more magnificent rituals (such as the opening ceremonies of the Olympics)? Clearly, culture cannot be reduced to "mere" thought—subjective, private, "immaterial," and inaccessible. Certainly its pattern is no less accessible than the structure of social relations, the logic of which Marx correctly argued was hidden deep beneath the surface.

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[10] Like many others, Kane never actually defines the term social structure. It becomes that *other* structure the components of which we are all, somehow magically, supposed to know. In the list she provides of "social, economic, political, and cultural structures" (1991, p. 59), for instance, social structure seems the *least* identifiable structure of the group. And the contrasts she provides (cited above) do little to clarify the matter.

And culture is clearly not infinitely malleable. If we understand culture as comprising dynamic systems of meaning with a certain inner logic of their own; systems that organize thought and are embedded in concrete ways of life; that are sometimes articulated and sometimes taken for granted; that are simultaneously external to the individual and internalized by her; that have both an ideal and a material existence; that are sometimes open to reflection and other times operating behind the backs of actors; that shape the way we think and act; systems that include language and knowledge as well as norms, values, and beliefs, the most grandiose ceremonies as well as the most mundane rituals; then we realize that culture is profoundly resilient (Durkheim 1965a; Geertz 1973; Madsen 1984; Parsons 1968). Systems of meaning are neither more nor less malleable than systems of social positions, social exchange, and social power.

New cultural forms do not arise at random: the pattern and the logic of existing culture and social relations both provide and limit the available possibilities. Mannheim is particularly useful in illustrating this point. Although he is generally understood as a theorist espousing the now widely held notion that ideas are linked to social position (e.g., Berger 1981; Gusfield 1986; Peiss 1986), Mannheim also clearly demonstrates that ideas exist as part of powerful and ordered cultural *systems*. He writes, "Every fact and event in an historical period is only explicable in terms of meaning, and meaning in its turn *always refers to another meaning*" (1985, pp. 68–69; my emphasis). In this sense, the "circumstances" to which differently located groups respond include preexisting ideas and available "styles of thought."

A provocative example is provided in "Conservative Thought" (Mannheim 1971, pp. 132–222). After the French Revolution, Mannheim argues, the traditional, "organic thought" of specific groups was confronted with the "rationality" of the rising bourgeoisie, and was therefore forced to become a "conscious and reflective" style of thought. Briefly, conservative thought (as dynamic, historical, qualitative thought, stressing the importance of historical circumstances, social relations, and the embeddedness of one's outlook in practice) arose from traditionalism and romanticism as an *articulated response* to bourgeois rationality and natural law thought derived from the Enlightenment (a static and unilinear conception of the world that focused on abstract universal principles and separated theory from practice). Conservative thought thus opposed liberal thought not only in its content, but also in its method, or style.[11] Systems of meaning, in other words, shape not only what particular ideas we use, but also the logic we use when stringing those ideas together. To put it another way, culture influences not only what we think about, but *how* we think about it.

More important, in this context, Mannheim demonstrates that new ways of thinking are always *derived* from old ways of thinking and *respond* to existing ways of thinking in a systematic fashion. It is in this spirit that he writes,

> Strictly speaking it is incorrect to say that the single individual thinks. Rather it is more correct to insist that he participates in thinking further what other men [and women] have thought before him (1985, p. 3).

New cultural forms are *not* arbitrary; they are socially structured by both existing cultural forms and by the existing relations between groups. And new ideas do not arise spontaneously in the minds of their individual carriers; they are shaped by the social groups to

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[11] Such an analysis of the logic, systematicity, continuity, and collectively transcendent nature of systems of meaning can also be found in Weintraub (forthcoming) and in Bellah et al. (1985), among others.

which those individuals belong and by the systems of meaning in which those individuals are immersed.

Culture is surely social and transcendent at the same time as it is *experienced* as individual and subjective.[12] People no more choose their language, their categories of thought, or the system of beliefs that confront them, than they choose to belong to a subordinate race, class, or gender, or elect to participate in a market economy and to confront a centralized and bureaucratized state that exists in a web of interconnected states in a world system. By the same token, capitalism could no more survive on the culture of collectivism and mutual obligation than the culture of individualism could survive in a system of tribal kinship (see Polanyi 1944).

Like relational systems, cultural systems not only constrain us to think and behave in certain ways, they simultaneously provide us a range of ways to think and behave at the same time they make human thought and action possible. By so doing, systems of meaning also allow for the possibility of structurally transformative agency. Thompson (1966) offers a fine example of this point. Retaining a firm grounding in the logical and systematic nature of culture, he demonstrates that cultural transformations occur in the context of structurally provided possibilities and structurally maintained constraints.[13]

In defining themselves as a class, Thompson argues that members of the English working class collectively made choices among the limited, but nonetheless empowering, stock of historically available cultural models. From the Constitution of 1688, they claimed themselves the "inheritors of the rights of Englishmen" (which included their right to be heard and to equality before the law); from the Enlightenment, they gained notions of rationality and acquired the idea of consciously developing an alternative society; from Paine's *Rights of Man,* they argued against aristocratic privileges and church authority; from traditional village rights and the paternalistic order, they made their claims to self-respect, pride in workmanship, a fair price, and a fair wage; from the tradition of the consumer-conscious "mob," they derived their right to revolt; and from the Methodist revival, they gained a sense of a "calling" that provided for sustained organizational dedication. By making these choices among structurally provided alternatives, English workers defined themselves as a class. That definition, though new, was sociologically comprehensible. And that definition, though structured, had a structurally transformative impact on the course of history.

Nonetheless, as I have stated, most agency is reproductive of social structures. As "agents" we might choose to change churches, create new forms of slang, reject the individualistic ethos of capitalism, or refuse to recognize the parrot as a bird, just as we could move to another country, take a job at a co-op, form a trade union, refuse to pay taxes, establish a commune, or get a divorce—but it is unlikely that these choices alone would fundamentally alter the underlying structural form of either culture or social relations. Cultural systems of knowledge, values, and practices, just like systems of relations between differently located social groups, are recurrently reproduced far more often than they are transformed; they must be considered as a form of social structure, a pattern of social life that tends to remain stable over time.

In sum, although culture is regularly contrasted to social structure, set in opposition to materialism, and treated as subjective, internal, malleable, and contingent, it is a mistake

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[12] Sewell (1985) clearly demonstrates the "anonymous" and "transpersonal" nature of ideology in his study of the French Revolution; Mead (1962) is arguably one of the most perceptive overall theorists of the social nature of thought; and Durkheim (1965a) provides perhaps the most powerful rendition of this point in his discussion of the transcendent nature of language.

[13] Himmelstein and Kimmel (1981), Madsen (1984), Sewell (1985), and Tucker (1977), in examining, respectively, the Russian Revolution, the Chinese Revolution, the French Revolution, and Stalinism provide equally relevant and enlightening examples of structurally transformative cultural agency that occurs in circumstances both relational and cultural.

to perpetuate these contrasts. Culture is, in fact, both external and internal, objective and subjective, material and ideal.[14] Not reducible to systems of social relations, culture has a logic of its own. Transcending individuals, constraining and enabling, produced in interaction and producing the form of interaction, culture is a resilient pattern that provides for the continuity of social life. A focus on culture, then, is no more voluntaristic than a focus on the mode of production. Culture is a social structure. Like systems of domination, it confronts us ready-made.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have here argued that people should be more attentive to their use of the terms structure, agency, and culture. From one point of view, this is "merely" an argument regarding language use, but if it has been convincing, the reader will recognize such rhetorical claims as crucial in *structuring* the way we understand and behave in the world. In this case, the language I suggest is meant to guide the conduct of empirical research. One's conceptualizations of structure, agency, and culture *do* shape what one chooses to study as well as the results of one's research, and it is for precisely this reason that we must overcome images of an optimistic voluntarist sitting alongside a pessimistic structuralist, a "rational scientist" studying "material reality" sitting alongside a "star-struck" interpretive sociologist studying "subjective meanings," and a strong-armed, systematic social structure sitting alongside a weak-kneed, creative culture and an incomprehensible, random agency.

Social life is fundamentally structured. But social structures do make possible a whole range of choices in everyday life. Certain structural configurations of resources and constraints make it more or less possible for people to make larger or smaller "creative" moves. Some portions of culture are easier to change than others (more open to reflective monitoring, less embedded in everyday practices), just as some elements of relational location are easier to change than others: you can change your geographic location, maybe your job, and sometimes even your sex, just as you may choose among a whole range of values and ideas to suit your more or less immediate interests. Although these are all agent-like choices, on the whole, such portions of relational and cultural systems are, relatively speaking, "superstructural": language and the categories of knowledge are not fundamentally altered, murder is still considered the highest crime, race and gender hierarchies endure, and the class system remains intact, as does the bureaucratic state machinery. The overall structure of social life persists, relatively unaltered.

The dynamic logic of systems of meaning and systems of social relations generally operates behind our backs, although we do, occasionally, turn around. And, whether it is the result of conscious and deliberate action or not, structural change does occur on a regular basis. In view of the processual nature of social structures, what might seem at first to be minor redecoration may ultimately lead to major rebuilding. Much of social change, in fact, seems to be the result of remodeling projects that, through intended or unintended consequences, lead to more substantial (and often costly) restoration or modernization of the building as a whole. The possibility for more abrupt structurally transformative agency, on the other hand, seems to depend on a potentially terrifying structural chaos (e.g., Hobsbawm 1962; Hunt 1984).

And it is partly for this reason that the relative stability of cultural and relational structures deserves to be celebrated just as much as the possibilities for social change.

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[14] I am far from suggesting that the dichotomies of material/ideal, subjective/objective, and internal/external should be abandoned (although "materialism" is often used so vaguely that I wouldn't mind seeing it discarded). I am simply advocating that culture (like structure and agency) should not be equated with only one side of each dualism.

The resilience of social structures, after all, allows us to go about our daily lives with some sense of security. More important, as Durkheim emphasizes, we should recognize that those same structures enable us to "rise above the beasts," at the same time they make human freedom, understood as "the capacity to govern and regulate ourselves," possible.

With all of this in mind, the relevant questions we face as researchers include, first, the specification of the characteristics of both cultural and relational structures—their logic, systematicity, the ways and the contexts in which they operate, and the relative resilience of their layers of patterning. Second, we might turn our attention to the question of under what cultural and relational conditions, and through what cultural and relational processes, structurally transformative agency occurs. Of particular interest in this regard is transformative agency carried out by those with less powerful positions in systems of social relations. Finally, we confront the long and important project of determining the ongoing interconnections between systems of meaning and systems of social relations. This project includes the recognition that these systems are empirically connected but analytically distinct, with an underlying logic and dynamics of their own.

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