

# SANDBLASTING STRUCTURES

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What is social structure? Few questions have garnered as much interest in the history of sociological theory. Among the more prominent answers finds social structure defined as a system that is self-reproducing and functionally integrated; a quality of the social environment determined by the parameters of individual characteristics; a pattern of interaction ties and relations between units; a system of relations between social positions organized for a purpose; a transformable pattern of binary relations that is objectified in cultural objects and forms of social organization; a coupling of cultural rules and material resources. The “first principle” sensibility that underlies these statements makes it seem not unreasonable to claim that, whether *de facto* or *de jure*, social structure constitutes the primary subject matter of the discipline.

With the amount of theoretical attention the issue has received over the years it might come as some surprise that John Levi Martin’s (2009) recent book should take up the gauntlet once again. But if a premise can be found to underlie this wide-ranging study, it is one that justifies returning to the breach. Theories of structure in sociology concentrate on two questions: 1) the emergence of structure (how it comes to be) and 2) the substance of structure (what it is). Most approaches focus on one side or the other, and only with great difficulty bring the two sides together (in a series of problematic “fudges” that try to go from the what to the how, or the how to the what: cf. Martin 2001). The Holy Grail is an approach that, killing two birds with one stone, answers both questions compatibly (if not at the same time).

For Martin, such an approach has remained elusive because the implications of Simmel’s formal sociology have been hitherto neglected in theoretical discussions of social structure. Network analysts incorporate the theoretical insights of triads, numbers and the “webs” of group-affiliations. Cultural sociologists remain enamored of Simmel’s impressionistic analyses of “objective culture.” But the discipline has not yet capitalized on the possibilities presented by “social forms” (like conflict, exchange, domination) for developing a stronger view of social structure.

Martin arrives at the laconic (but indicative) title “Social Structures” (the plural is important) for a book that adopts a similar perspective as the one that underpins Simmel’s sociology of social forms. Similar to Simmel’s account of the “crystallization” of social forms from “immediate interactions,” Martin describes how social structures emerge as the crystallization of the structural tendencies immanent to specific types of “local” relationships. Similar to Simmel’s attempt to delimit the “autonomous” properties of social forms, Martin argues that “any useful

definition of social structure has to allow for regularities that are *not* institutions, and that do *not* arise because interactants understand their normative responsibility to act in a certain way” (p. 7; emphasis original).

To put it baldly, then, Martin contends that, in order to capture the formal and irreducible kernel at the heart of social structures, sociologists should start conceiving of them in terms provided by the concept of social forms. Here, social structures (at least of the “single-stranded” variety) are taken to be the “objective content,” or immanent “structural tendencies,” present in social relationships, which social actors enlist, in the course of association, to realize complex and stable forms of social organization.

The key to this argument is the idea of “structural tendencies.” As Martin suggests, this term is best understood in terms of the “felt difficulty” that arises when participants violate the “content” of a relationship—or the sort of thing that happens when you claim two best friends but, in doing so, violate the reciprocity demanded by both (p. 20). That it is even possible to be dissonant with a *relationship* suggests that it possesses its own inertia. The most important thing about these structural tendencies is that, as social forms, the same ones present in local relationships are also found in structures of greater concatenation. Thus, a clique of 4 people resembles a clique of 4,000 (which is why the latter is impossible). What emerges from local relationships is the same kernel of structure apparent at more global levels. This is not only because what is “structural” about relationships remains the same regardless of the level at which they are found, it is also because social actors, at different levels, understand them using the same “heuristics.” Consequently, if a major problem of prior structural theories lay in moving between “the what and the how” while maintaining parsimony and contiguity in the meantime, then Martin accomplishes this feat with the view that formal properties define structures, and structural tendencies, in turn, define those formal properties.

This speaks to another reason for Martin’s attraction to Simmel. The discoveries of cognitive science, and the opportunities they open for sociological theory, warrants a return to the structural implications of the concept of social forms. Most structural theories retain a view of cognition that imputes implausible properties to human actors. They do this in order to account for the emergence of structural complexity—their true focus—on the scale that sociological methods are good at identifying. But if humans are actually as simple as cognitive science shows them to be (cf. Cowan 2001) this introduces a problem concerning structural emergence: How can sociologists account for structural complexity without, at the same time, resorting to implausible psychology?

Taking a cue from Herbert Simon (1962), Martin argues that the complexity of human social behavior can be accounted for in the same way that one might account for the complex movements of an ant walking across a beach. In both cases, the source of the complexity comes not from the agent, but from the *environment*.

Access to the properties stored there allows ant and human alike to demonstrate behaviors they would otherwise be incapable of performing. As far as humankind goes, Martin hits upon social structures—understood through the lens of social forms—as a primary source of external cognitive support. In this instance, if social structures are forms, and intrinsic structural tendencies characterize those forms, then those tendencies persist as a kind of *scaffolding* around which complex types of social organization, and the regularity and predictability of everyday life, ultimately subsist.

In this way, Martin avoids a second major problem in prior structural theories: the tendency to equate social structure with constraint. Several of the definitions mentioned above converge on the root metaphor that “society is a building” and that social structure subsequently represents the ceilings and frames that determine nonrandom behavior. In this case, structure is a constraining force that limits the possibilities of action. But if Foucault once problematized a similar “repressive hypothesis” when it came to power, then Martin makes a similar move in terms of structure. Structural forms emerge from the tendencies immanent to relationships, and in this capacity they serve as the plinth that buttresses the development of complex forms of social organization. In other words, structures support action, rather than contain it. Instead of a man in a building, or a ball in a box, imagine a kid, on a chair, reaching *for* a cookie jar. If determination remains, then it exercises a *constitutive* rather than constraining effect.

Most of Martin’s book is dedicated to wide-ranging, though carefully nuanced, empirical discussions concerned with identifying different types of social structures (for instance, cliques, exchange structures, influence trisets, command trees). This is expected—the burden is on him to prove the redundancy of structures despite a multitude of other differences. So his discussions draw from a range of historical, anthropological and sociological cases. They are beyond the scope of this essay to review, but suffice it to discuss Martin’s primary empirical claim: that the major factor in “the formation of large-scale social structures involves patronage triangles being concatenated into pyramids, and transitivity being introduced ... Other structures are, by and large, doomed from the start to stay small” (p. 333).

Such is the master recipe for the production of nation-states, armies and political parties. Martin defines concatenation in terms similar to Harrison White. It refers to the relationships that occur *between* different specific relationships as they are linked together through third parties. In this instance, different patronage triangles—defined by a single patron and clients who are not aware of their structural equivalence—are joined to other patronage triangles by linking patrons together in a pyramid headed by a master patron. Here, transitivity refers to the direction of the specific relationships. The classic (feudal) patronage relation is *antitransitive*, which means that while a Duke might pay homage to a King, the King does not thereby control the Duke’s retinue. Martin finds that the introduction of transitivity to this relationship—which alters the structural tendencies of patronage

in terms of the King now controlling the Duke's retinue—provides the structural basis necessary for the emergence of modern nation-states.

Thus, in medieval Europe, the collapse of the Roman Empire first severed transitive relationships, allowing patronage triangles to spring up amid the conditions of “serious material inequality.” But with the reintroduction of transitivity—under pressures for more efficient command structures in periods of conflict—these triangles were concatenated into expansive pyramids, providing the formal molding for the subsequent return of the “macro” in European modernity (chap. 7). Martin finds a similar process at work in the post-colonial United States, where a combination of New York City's “vertical” patronage blocs with the “horizontal” interest group factions of Virginia fueled the rise of national political parties (chap. 8).

Note that much of Martin's account rests on the description of inadequacies, at the *formal* level, of alternative ways of realizing “large-scale social structures,” other than through manipulated patronage relationships. In this instance, if you want to create the potential for the emergence of large-scale social structure, simply inject transitivity into a preexisting antitransitive relationship. The effect should obtain regardless of the content involved. Thus, for both nation-states and national political parties, emergence rests on the basis of the structural *form* provided, at least initially, by patronage relationships. In this regard, the form provides the lodestone that ties these types of complex organization together.

A key component of Martin's argument is that actors have access to the “logic” of the structural tendencies of relationships, which they understand in terms of simple “heuristics.” For instance, patronage structures produce the heuristics “do not accept influence from someone lower than yourself” and “do not accept a client who already has a patron” (pp. 194-195). Actors can decouple these tendencies from their basis in structural forms and use them to reorganize relationships, or even create new ones, found in other domains. Indeed, this is what happened with the case of nation-states and political parties, as a transitive heuristic was applied to an existing antitransitive relationship in order to establish the conditions necessary for the emergence of these large-scale social structures. Such is the basis for Martin's view of institutions—or “free-floating heuristics”—and his version of Simmel's view of the “duality” of structure: this time between structural tendencies and their institutional logics.

This account of subjective meaning is important for Martin's redefinition of social structures in terms of social forms, but a problem arises in his account of the transmission that takes place between actors and structures. Simmel does not establish how social forms can have a cognitive presence. He even argues against the necessity of locating social forms in “psychological categories” that remain “outside the purposes of sociological investigation” (cf. Simmel 1971 [1894]: 35). So if we understand social structures in terms of social forms, how are we then to

account for the cognitive presence of heuristics, or the ability of actors to harness the tendencies provided by structural forms?

Martin often enlists the help of Durkheim to address the difficulties that emerge from Simmel's absent discussion of transmission. The former's concept of institutionalization is found compatible with the latter's. And Durkheim even provides an emphasis on the cognitive basis of structural forms. But outside an account of the antagonistic encounters, submissive behavior and self-confidence that produces recognition of "pecking orders" (pp. 104-150) the book finds no further discussion of the *practices* that might underpin the cognition of social structures. Of course, Martin often references the ability of actors to "intuit" the logic of structural tendencies (p. 337). If stated elliptically, perhaps this might address the missing account of transmission. However, he never really establishes what he means by the phrase, leaving the reader to conceive only of something like a behaviorist model of simple exposure to "regularity" as providing the basis for the knowledge of structures.

This presents a problem insofar Martin's contribution consists largely of his ability to incorporate a cognitive aspect to theories of social structure. Indeed, by incorporating cognition, he provides as robust a definition of the term "institution" as found among the best of the new institutionalists (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). In this regard, if structure consists, fundamentally, of a *logic* (rooted in the tendencies of a form), then it can transcend social levels with relative ease, as observed in the variety of heuristics that guide tie-formation in associations related to friendship and alliance (p. 68). Moreover, the Holy Grail of structural theories—linking emergence to substance—is probably obtained most easily simply by eliminating the difference between the two sides, and showing how emergence is also presence. As Durkheim initially realized, the best way to reveal the identity of the emergence and substance of social structure is through the structuring force of representations (1984[1893]: 61). Cognition (or, more specifically, *embodiment*) is central to both arguments, as Martin recognizes, but absent a more thorough account of transmission—or how the objective facts of structure get "into" actors—we still do not capture the kind of contribution it makes.

Nevertheless, to Martin's credit he identifies the problem and develops a strong solution. The major problem relating to the concept of structure—present in sociology, chemistry, physics, biology, neuroscience, engineering and beyond—is to account for the emergence of structures, with clearly delimited properties, from the interaction of component parts (Sawyer 2001). Martin presents what is likely the strongest approach to this problem in sociological theory to date. Revitalizing the discussion of social forms as they relate to this issue is an innovative and signal contribution—the problematic cognitive implications notwithstanding. Most notably, theorizing social structures in terms of social forms seems to open the potential for incorporating, to a greater extent, the possibilities opened by methods derived from graph theory and other "qualitative mathematics" into the sociological analysis of structures. Indeed, the great appeal of network analysis (and Simmel)

rests on its ability to identify a sociological “domain of necessity” that is *not* quantitative, or a matter of variable magnitudes (cf. Levi-Strauss 1955: 585). But how can we extrapolate this insight beyond network structures? Martin’s book provides a solid theoretical basis for moving in that direction.

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