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Reconceptualizing Social Structure and Agency: Epistemological Approaches and Theoretical Models in Contemporary Sociology

إعادة تصور العلاقة بين البنية الاجتماعية والفاعلية: مقاربة إبستمولوجية ونقدية للنماذج السوسيولوجية المعاصرة

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Abstract

This article addresses the issue of social structure and its relation to agency from an epistemological perspective, by analyzing the major sociological dualisms that have shaped theoretical debates: is structure an objective and autonomous dimension of social reality, or merely an analytical instrument embedded in practices? The discussion begins with classical definitions, then examines the analytical models of N. Elias (figurations, sociogenesis/psychogenesis), P. Bourdieu (fields, capitals, and habitus), and A. Giddens (duality of structure, structuration theory). It then turns to the study of inequality and class structure as the most concrete historical manifestation of structure, before addressing contemporary proposals by J. Goldthorpe and E. O. Wright, who link theory and empirical research. Finally, the article analyzes the complex relationship between culture and social structure, particularly in the context of the nation-state and social classes. It concludes that social structure is neither a mere external framework nor a purely subjective construct, but rather a dynamic process of sociological modeling, marked by the dialectic between continuity and change, constraint and enablement, objectivity and subjectivity.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

البنية الاجتماعية

الابيتسمولوجيا

الطبقات الاجتماعية

الديناميكية الاجتماعية

البنيوية.

ملخص

يتناول هذا المقال إشكالية البنية الاجتماعية وعلاقتها بالفاعلية من منظور إبستمولوجي، من خلال تحليل الثنائيات السوسيولوجية الكبرى التي صاغت النقاش النظري حول طبيعة البنية: هل هي بُعد موضوعي مستقل أم أداة تحليلية مرتبطة بالممارسات؟ ينطلق البحث من التعريفات الكلاسيكية للبنية، ثم يستعرض النماذج التحليلية عند إلياس (التشكيلات والنشأة الاجتماعية/النفسية)، بورديو (الحقول، والهابيتوس)، وغيدنز (ازدواجية البنية ونظرية التنظيم). بعد ذلك، ينتقل إلى دراسة اللامساواة وبنية الطبقات الاجتماعية، بوصفها المظهر التاريخي الأكثر تجسيدًا للبنية، قبل أن يعرض المقترحات المعاصرة عند غولدثورب وإريك أولين رايت، اللذين جمعا بين النظرية والتحليل التجريبي. ويُختتم المقال بتحليل العلاقة المعقدة بين الثقافة والبنية الاجتماعية، خاصة في سياق الدولة–الأمّة والطبقات الاجتماعية. يخلص المقال إلى أن البنية الاجتماعية ليست مجرد إطار خارجي أو ذاتي، بل هي عملية دينامية للنمذجة السوسيولوجية، تجمع بين الاستمرارية والتغير، بين الإكراه والتمكين، وبين الموضوعي والذاتي.

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1. Introduction

Social structure is one of the fundamental concepts in sociology; however, defining its nature and the relationship between it and agency presents a complex epistemological issue. While some approaches consider structure as an objective dimension imposed upon individuals, others argue that structure is merely an analytical tool used to understand social relationships, existing only through the actions and practices of actors. This dilemma calls for an in-depth discussion of the boundaries of the concept and the logic of sociological modeling upon which studies of structure are based. In this context, the study raises the following question: How can the relationship between social structure and agency be conceptualized? Is structure an independent entity, or is it simply an intellectual abstraction that facilitates the understanding of social life?

The aim of this article is to analyze the relationship between social structure and agency within an epistemological framework, through a critical review of the major sociological models that have addressed this issue. In this regard, the theoretical approaches of Norbert Elias, Pierre Bourdieu, and Anthony Giddens will be examined with respect to their sociological modeling of structure. Additionally, contemporary theories on class and inequality, particularly through the works of Goldthorpe and Erik Olin Wright, will be explored. The ultimate goal of this study is to assess the ability of sociological models to explain the dialectic between structure and agency, and how they relate to culture and the nation-state in contemporary contexts.

Methodologically, this study adopts a critical epistemological approach, focused on analyzing sociological concepts through the review and interpretation of foundational texts within the philosophy of social science. The focus will be on theoretical models that present diverse conceptions of social structure, analyzing how these concepts have evolved over time and interacted with different social and political conditions. The study will rely on a comparative analytical approach between various theoretical frameworks, as well as a critical review of the conceptual tools employed by sociologists to understand social structures.

2. Preliminary Considerations: Sociological Dualisms and Definitions of Structure

The concept of social structure is widely used, but it often lacks a unified definition. Nonetheless, various definitions reveal common elements: any human aggregation that persists over time, when viewed from a relational perspective, displays recurring mechanisms for integrating individuals, distributing their positions, and allocating both material and symbolic resources. **(Piaget, 2007) (Dosse, 2012) (Dosse, 2012) (Kurzweil, 1980) (Petitot, 1999) (Maurice Corvez, 1968) (Calhoun, 2002)** These features, common across groups, organizations, communities, and inter-societal systems, form the minimal shared basis for the concept of structure. The substantial differences, however, center around essential dualities:

1. Structure: Objective Reality or Analytical Tool?

According to methodological individualism, structure is confined to the level of individuals and their interactions, representing a logical-formal construction to simplify the complexity of social life.

In contrast, from other perspectives, structure is considered a formative dimension of reality, embodied in the regularity of social relationships and their objective effects on the conditions and horizons of existence.

2. Positions or Networks?

Is structure a network of interdependent positions, or a set of functional networks of mutual reliance?

Parsons: Structure = Interconnected social roles.

- His followers: Structure = Interdependent positions, with relative autonomy from individuals. **(PARSONS, 2017)**

Elias: Rejected the concept of structure in favor of "configurations": networks of interdependence, unstable in balance, grounded in power, conflict, and competition. **(Mennell, 2004) (Chevalier & Privat, 2004)**

3. Objectivity of Structure or Its Embodiment in Practice?

Marx: Structure = Coercive relations of production, independent of individual will. **(BENDIX, 1974)**

- «Durkheim»: Structure = External and coercive social facts, akin to institutions. **(GERSTEIN, 1979)**

- In contrast, «Elias», Mead, Giddens, and Bourdieu emphasize that structure cannot be detached from practices but rather manifests in the constitution of individuals, their behaviors, and daily experiences. **(LIZARDO, 2010)**

- «Bourdieu»: Structure on two parallel levels:

- Objective: In relations and positions within «social fields».

- Subjective: In categories of perception and appreciation, differentiated according to positions.

4. «Structure: Constraint or Empowerment?»

Despite its coercive nature, as seen in the works of Marx and Durkheim, contemporary approaches assert that structure also «enables» behavior and social life.

5. «Equilibrium or Conflict?»

- Equilibrium theories: Structures maintain themselves through functional harmony and self-equilibrium (homeostatic equilibrium).

- Conflict theories: Structure results from competition and class or group struggles (Marx: relations of production; Weber: values; Dahrendorf: political control; Elias: power and gains).

Thus, social structure primarily refers to the «most enduring and expansive social relations», embodied in the economic, political, cultural, and social fields. These relationships are governed by a logic of reproduction that transcends individual wills, yet they are realized through daily practices, including forms of authority and control.

Structure is not merely a conceptual tool, but a «real component» encompassing:

- «An objective dimension»: In the regularity of relationships and positions.

- «A subjective–internalized dimension»: In the constitution of individuals and their perceptions.

Consequently, it simultaneously «constrains» and «empowers», subject to a historical logic that oscillates between continuity and rupture, cooperation and conflict.

Finally, despite the relational character of structure, distinguishing it from culture, norms, and positions remains an analytical distinction, as the logic of human societies is simultaneously relational, normative, and semantically driven. This underscores the significance of the approaches by «Giddens» (rules and resources), «Bourdieu» (relational and positional nature), and «Elias» (configurations and interdependence), which aim to establish a dialectical understanding of the relationship between individuals, agency, culture, and structure.

3. Analytical Models of Social Structure: Elias, Bourdieu, Giddens»

3.1. Elias: Sociogenesis, Psychogenesis, and Figurational Sociology»

In his seminal work «The Civilizing Process», Elias explores the formation of modern European society from a historical perspective spanning several centuries. His study focuses on the emergence and formation of "behavioral patterns that represent the idealized civilized human," linked to changes in the networks of interdependence in both the economic and political domains.

In summary, Elias' perspective is characterized by the following features:

A) Relational Nature:

For Elias, sociology is the science of social relations. He focuses not on fixed structures, but on various «configurations» or «networks of interdependence» formed between individuals through their activities. These configurations are marked by unstable balances of power and impose logics of functioning on participants, where individuals exercise social control over one another.

B) Processual Nature:

Elias places significant emphasis on distinguishing the different stages of the «civilizing process».

He identifies how, in each phase, the possibilities and constraints faced by individual actors and social classes, as well as the transformations within configurations, are determined. **(AYA, 1978)**

C) Integration of the Subjective and Objective:

Elias considers both the subjective and objective aspects of social life, including material, symbolic, economic, and political dimensions. He suggests that any sociological analysis of social change should address two intertwined processes:

1. «Sociogenesis»: The study of the emergence, development, and transformation of configurations or functional networks of economic and political interdependence. This includes the establishment of stable centers of political control, the monopoly of physical violence, the division of labor, specialization, economic and political articulation, intra-class and inter-class competition and conflict, the economic, political, and cultural transformations of classes in light of competition, shifts in customs and behavioral norms, and the formation of class rationalities based on profit (bourgeoisie) or prestige and power (nobility).

- In short, the goal is to analyze changes in individual conduct in its historical connection to transformations in the networks of interdependence, namely class structure, the market, and the state.

2. «Psychogenesis»: The study of changes in modes of thinking and feeling within individuals, particularly the transformations in the psychic structure of individual personalities, closely linked to sociocultural and political transformations resulting from sociogenesis. These transformations lead to the expansion of internal self-control exercised by individuals over their impulses and behaviors. Elias asserts that the human psyche, like configurations, social relations, and social classes, evolves over time. **(ELIAS, 1997) (BOGNER, 1986)**

3.2. Bourdieu: Capitals, Fields, and Structures

Drawing from his major work «Distinction», as well as his writings «Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action» («Raisons pratiques: sur la théorie de l'action») and «Social Space and the Genesis of Classes», Bourdieu introduces central concepts to understand social structures.

Bourdieu argues that the task of sociology is to uncover the deeper structures that explain the functioning and reproduction of society. For this, he suggests that structures exist in two forms:

1. «First-Order Objectivity»: This represents the objective dimension of social life, where positions are structured within fields based on the distribution and accessibility of cultural and economic capital in capitalist societies.

2. «Second-Order Objectivity»: This refers to «habitus»—the system of categories of perception and appreciation that shapes individuals' social actions and experiences. **(Bourdieu, 1980, p. 117)**

Bourdieu's conception of structure integrates both subjective and objective, affective and cognitive, material and symbolic aspects of social life. He links the reproduction of society to the existence of classes and their patterns of action.

3.3. Giddens: Structure, System, and Social Practices»

In «The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration», Giddens aims to develop a theory that integrates and goes beyond structuralist currents, which prioritize the social whole over human actors, and hermeneutic currents, which overlook structural constraints and are based on the imperialism of the subject. **(BABER, 1991) (ROJOT, 2000)**

To achieve this, Giddens takes social practices—organized in time and space—as the starting point of his theory. He posits that humans are intentional agents, and their actions are based on reasons for which they can provide discursive elaboration if required. He suggests that social action is guided by:

- «Practical consciousness», grounded in routine;

- «Discursive consciousness»;

« «Unconsciousness».

While engaging in social activities, individuals maintain a reflexive monitoring of their actions and practice rationalization, continuously maintaining a theoretical understanding of the foundations of their behavior. Their actions are also driven by motivation, often providing general plans within which a wide

range of behaviors are enacted.

4. Inequality and Social Class Structure»

Inequality refers to the unequal distribution of material and symbolic resources within society. This distribution is regulated by norms and laws, legitimized through culture and mechanisms of symbolic domination. However, it remains dynamic due to the continuous struggle between different visions and practices regarding what the structure of society should be.

Historically, this disparity takes the form of social classes: structurally interconnected groups that occupy distinct positions in the social structure, granting them varying levels of access to goods, authority, and capital, and consequently to unequal life opportunities. Thus, conflicting class interests emerge, which may manifest in struggles of diverse forms and intensities. **(LAMSAL, 2012)**

In modern societies, the formation of classes and their positions is determined by fundamental factors such as the emergence of the nation-state, industrial capitalism, and the rise of forms of symbolic control associated with rationalization, science, and technology. While class position is primarily defined by an actor's relationship to the means of production, class relations extend beyond the economic to encompass political, cultural, and symbolic dimensions. Therefore, both economic and cultural dimensions, especially family socialization and education, are critical in class classification within advanced capitalist societies.

The class structure is not an independent entity or a self-organizing mechanism, but a social process that is reproduced through the organization of access to resources on one hand, and the practices of actors on the other. In this context, Giddens (duality of structure), Elias (psychogenesis and sociogenesis), and Bourdieu (social space, field, habitus) highlight the dual nature of structure: it is simultaneously a condition and a product of social action. **(LAZAR, 1992)**

For analytical distinction, two dimensions can be considered:

1. «The Hierarchical-Distributive Dimension»: Relates to positions within the productive and professional structure.

2. «The Practical Dimension»: Concerns the actual political, cultural, and economic actions undertaken by classes.

Despite the multidimensional nature of class relations, the economic dimension remains central, as agreed upon by Bourdieu, Giddens, Elias, Castells, and others, while also acknowledging the interconnectedness of political, cultural, and social dimensions, without reducing them to the economic. Empirical studies also show that position in the productive structure is strongly linked to other forms of inequality, such as race, gender, ethnicity, age, and religion, with this connection influenced by the degree of state institutionalization, citizenship, and market mechanisms.

4.1. Contemporary Approaches: Goldthorpe and Wright

- Goldthorpe (in a revised Weberian tradition): Focuses on explaining the stability of class structures and inequality over time, critiquing both Marxism and liberalism. He proposes a research agenda that links class structure, mobility, and inequality, relying on methodological individualism and rational action theory to explain individual choices within structural constraints. Class positions are primarily defined through occupational status (employer, self-employed, employee) and organization (employment contract or service relationship). **(GOLDTHORPE, 1969) (HART, 1994)**

- Erik Olin Wright (in the Marxist tradition): Makes exploitation the central principle for class analysis, considering that conflict, interest, and class consciousness are derived from it. He rejects the simplified dual model and emphasizes the need for structural complexity in determining class positions, such as working conditions, authority, professional time, intra-class differences, and the relationship between family and class. Based on this, he proposes an expanded model with twelve class categories to study class consciousness and mobility. **(WRIGHT, 1979)**

Despite economic growth, technological innovation, and rising levels of education and living standards

in advanced societies, social inequalities have not significantly diminished, nor have classes disappeared as some have claimed. On the contrary, the presence of classes and the persistence of inequality remain a firm sociological reality, supported by most theoretical and empirical analyses.

4.2. The Relationship Between Culture and Social Structure

The analytical distinction between culture and social structure is a fundamental step in sociological research, as it allows for the identification of the subject of study, the clarification of causal patterns between phenomena, and the differentiation of analytical levels. Although culture and structure do not exist independently in reality, separating them highlights specific areas in social life and helps to understand the connections between agency, structure, and culture.

- «Social Structure»: Refers to the relationships, positions, and roles occupied by individuals and groups (organizations, networks, social categories).

- «Culture»: Includes institutions, values, trust patterns, behavioral orientations, processes of rationalization, as well as states of anomie and deviance.

-To illustrate the relationship between these two dimensions, two examples can be considered:

4.2.1. Culture and the Nation-State

The modern concept of culture emerged at the intersection of the formation of the nation-state and the conflict between political entities.

1. At the political level, the establishment of the nation-state required the centralization of power and its legitimization through the imposition of a certain degree of «cultural homogenization»: official language, reinterpretation of traditions, standardized education, and the monopoly of symbolic capital.

2. At the intellectual level, «Elias» (1994) makes a distinction between «culture (Kultur)», which carries historical authenticity and social roots, and «civilization (Zivilisation)», associated with French achievements of a universal and rationalist nature. This distinction has fueled two directions: linking culture to national identity (nourishing nationalism), or redefining it in the plural form (cultures), allowing for a departure from a hierarchical view. **(BLEICHER, 1990) (KUZMICS, 1987) (ARNASON, 1989)**

These debates have influenced sociological theory: while «Parsons» assumed the society-nation-state correspondence and the possibility of integration through a unified value system, «Berger and Luckmann» (1968) highlighted the limitations of this assumption, arguing that any society, whether traditional or modern, does not possess complete cultural harmony. Cultural pluralism is a constant, but dominant classes seek to impose their vision through «hegemony», which is often confused with integration.

4.2.2. Culture and Socio-Economic Structure and Classes

Different theoretical perspectives assign varying epistemological weight to «culture» and «economics» in explaining the constitution of class structures:

1. «Culture as Ideology»:

For «Marx», the ruling class ensures its dominance not only through economic control but also by imposing its worldview as the prevailing ideology. The subordinate classes, confined by structural constraints, can generate only partial perspectives unless aided by external agents capable of articulating a counter-hegemonic vision. «Gramsci» deepens this framework with his concept of «hegemony», emphasizing that political, economic, and cultural domination attains stability when the worldview of the ruling class is internalized and legitimized by society at large. **(WRIGHT, 1984) (WRIGHT, 1980)**

2. «Culture as Lifestyle»:

«Weber» highlights the correlation between lifestyles and market position, where access to resources—capital, labor, or knowledge—defines modes of consumption and social distinction. «Bourdieu» advances this approach by demonstrating how class identity is enacted through patterns of cultural and economic consumption, producing a symbolic economy of difference. Class position, in this sense, is not merely an economic category but a relational identity, continuously forged through struggles of distinction and recognition.

3. «Culture as Values and Collective Representations»:

«Durkheim» conceives the deepening of the division of labor as a transformative force that fragments traditional collective consciousness and engenders differentiated symbolic universes. By contrast, «Weber» underscores the pluralization of value systems, where conflicting normative orders generate tension within and between classes, thereby shaping the dynamics of modern social stratification.

Taken together, these perspectives reveal that the nexus between culture and social structure is not reducible to a unidirectional relation of determination. Rather, it manifests as a «dialectical process»: culture legitimates and reproduces structures, while simultaneously serving as a contested field of struggle, resistance, and potential transformation. **(WRIGHT, COSTELLO, & HACHEN, The American class structure, 1982)**

5. Epistemological Implications: Rethinking Social Structure and Agency

The link between social structure and agency is not only a classic theme in sociological theory, but also an epistemological dilemma that requires us to re-examine the limits of sociological modelling and its internal logic. The complexity of this relationship forces us to question the way we represent social reality: is structure an objective given in itself, or is it merely a conceptual construct that serves analysis? This question, though seemingly merely theoretical, has a direct impact on how we understand the mechanisms of social reproduction, the possibilities of transformation, and forms of resistance. Here, we cannot overlook the role of culture and the state—as an overarching framework—in reshaping these social dynamics.

The contributions of scholars such as Elias with his concept of configurations, Bourdieu's field/habitus duality, and Giddens' theory of structuration, reveal that structure is neither an external force nor a mere analytical tool. Rather, it is a relational, dynamic phenomenon that is constantly reproduced by the daily practices of social actors. Thus, the actor is not merely a 'product' of structure, but a partner in its formulation and transformation.

But from an epistemological point of view, this overlap raises troubling questions: how do we study a concept such as structure that is at once 'real' and 'constructed,' objective and subjective? And how can we take into account its historical transformation without overlooking the role of the actors who contribute to its construction and are at the same time subject to it? These questions are not limited to theory, but are reflected in field research and in the methods of reading and interpreting empirical data.

The matter becomes even more complex when we introduce culture into the equation: culture cannot be considered merely an ideological superstructure (as in Marx's classical formulation, as we have noted), nor is it a neutral system of values and symbols. Rather, it is both a tool for reproducing structures and an open field of conflict, where classes compete as structures and actors for legitimacy, recognition and symbolic hegemony. Hence, the simple distinction between 'structure' and 'agency' or between "objective" and 'subjective' becomes more procedural than real.

We can therefore say that the epistemological implications of this epistemological debate on structure require us to abandon rigid conceptions in favour of a more integrated approach. An approach that sees structure, agency and culture as forming a network of interrelated relationships, and that the task of the researcher in the humanities and social sciences is not to separate them but to trace the mechanisms of their interrelation and reproduction. This requires constant epistemological vigilance, so that the researcher remains constantly aware of the hypotheses on which his analysis is based and cautious about any approach that reduces social dynamics to a single dimension. Social reality, as revealed by the dialectical interaction between structure, agency and culture, can only be understood as a changing, intertwined entity that simultaneously carries within it the limits and possibilities of action.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the study of the concept of social structure and its dialectic with the concept of agency has revealed the complex and profound dimensions of this relationship, which has

long been the subject of debate in sociological and epistemological literature. Through our comparative analysis of the major theoretical models presented by Elias, Bourdieu, Giddens, Goldthorpe, and Wright, it has become clear as a conclusion that social structure is not merely a fixed and isolated framework, but rather a dynamic process immanent to the practices of social actors, reproducing itself through daily practices. The study has also shown that the social actor is not merely a result of structure, as we find in some classical conceptions, but is an active element that contributes to the formation and transformation of structure through his free or interactive actions and decisions.

Likewise, the sociological dualities that were studied in the article from an epistemological perspective—such as the dualities between the objective and the subjective, structure and agency, and cultural and social classes—show that these dualities are not merely theoretical distinctions but are rather a continuous interaction between the objective dimensions of social reality and the subjective dimensions carried by individuals through their daily interactions. Accordingly, social structure, although determining the relationships between individuals and groups, is at the same time changeable, and social actors contribute to the shaping of social structures over time.

Through this epistemological approach to structure, via the analysis of contemporary theories, a fundamental conclusion has been reached: social structure is neither fixed nor independent of actors; rather, it is a continuous product of social practices. The study shows that structure is, in fact, the result of an ongoing dialogue between social agency and institutional structure, something that reorients our traditional concepts of power, culture, and social classes.

Finally, it can be said that the interaction between culture and social structure remains one of the central axes in understanding how social and class identities are formed. In light of these results, the study emphasizes the necessity of expanding the epistemological horizon in understanding social structure through an in-depth analysis of various sociological models, as well as the importance of focusing on cultural agency as part of the structure of power and social identities.

Conflict of Interest

The author of this article, declare no intended conflict of interest.

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