

# Social Structure

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## INTRODUCTION

The concept of social structure has been one of the most important in the social sciences. Because of its relevance, its meaning has been the subject of debate between diverse disciplines. While political science tends to consider social structure as it affects political dynamics, in sociology it has been a central object of study since the beginning of the discipline. This has led to several points of convergence and dialogue between both fields, since the comprehension of social structures can partially help to understand political phenomena, but can also lead to mistakes due to the reduction of political conflicts to the influence of social structure, or their ‘sociologization’ (Sartori, 1969). Nevertheless, in its conceptualization of social structures, sociology has always considered implications of political phenomena in one way or another, without necessarily reducing the focus simply to the consequences of social structures. This chapter

discusses problems of social structure, from the perspective of sociology, and their consequences for politics.

## SOCIAL STRUCTURE: THE SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH

The concept of social structure in sociology varies as widely as social theories in general. It has been of concern since the beginnings of the discipline, even though it has not always been used in the same way. Taking the most general approach, according to Giner et al. (2006: 311), it can be said that social structure in sociology refers to ‘the most permanent, the basic, the non-apparent and maybe hidden, the framework or maybe the logical shape of something’. After this first vague delineation, the authors point to at least five different concerns in sociology’s structural problematization: (1) the structure–agency relation; (2) the static and dynamic

aspects of structures; (3) the distinction between analytical and concrete structures; (4) the descriptive–explanatory conception of structure; and (5) the structure–culture relation (ibid: 311).

The first dimension of the problem concerns the micro–macro dichotomy, where it must be discerned whether a phenomenon depends on particular elements (the agents) or on long-lasting context characteristics (the structure). This tends to be the most important subject when talking about structure in sociology. The second dilemma refers to the conception of structure as an immutable, steady component, or as a dynamic factor of social changes (the motor of history of Marxism<sup>1</sup> is an extreme example). Third, it must be discerned whether a structure has distinguishable characteristics that allow its isolation from others in a concrete empirical way or whether it is a purely analytical category that cannot be separated from other elements (e.g. economic and political structures that can be differentiated from others only analytically but in fact interact in many ways). The fourth point refers to Levi-Strauss' concept of structure as a theoretical framework to understand the elements of society that determine the actions of subjects, but the objective existence of which cannot be assured. The fifth dimension deals with the contrasts and interactions of the concept of structure in relation to that of culture. The assimilation of both is present mainly in the Parsonian tradition, where it is assumed that culture assigns roles to actors and therefore determines structures. In the perspective that opposes structure and culture, the first is related to objective aspects (from demographic characteristics to social groups as classes or nations), while culture is understood as a 'subjective' dimension of social life. In some schools, the debate around these concepts is open – as in Marxism, where some oppose culture and structure while others consider culture as one of the structures of society.

These are the problems most frequently dealt with in the treatment of social structure

in sociology. This does not mean that they are always considered in each theory, but rather that they are the most problematic issues of the concept. In most of the theories we discuss, these problematic dimensions of social structure can be traced.

## **SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGY**

One initial conception of the problem of structure in Durkheim's ideas emerges in the basic rules which he explains as part of his sociological method. When he defines 'social facts', he refers to them as something that affects a subject 'with a compelling and coercive power by virtue of which, whether he wishes it or not, they impose themselves upon him' (Durkheim, 1982: 51). It can be noticed in this brief statement that in Durkheim's sociology the subjects, their will or the agency that can emerge from them are not relevant – neither for the discipline nor for the course of society. What can help to understand society and its changes are the collective phenomena that transcend individuals and 'impose themselves'.

The main social structure change to which Durkheim attends refers to the tendency of specialization in the functions of the subject in modern societies, which creates new relations between individuals (Durkheim, 1965). In other words, he looks to a new type of society where the main processes of change are explained by that tendency of division of labor and the course this structure takes. The transition from traditional to modern societies that he describes is also an interesting example of the problem mentioned previously concerning the opposition of culture and social structure. In traditional societies, culture is the main cohesive element, while in modern societies the structural division of labor becomes most relevant for social cohesion. This is also a topic much studied by Karl Marx.

In the works of Marx, social structure is more consistently dealt with and his notions are sharper than Durkheim's. For our purposes, the Marxist approach to social structure can be summarized in two premises: first, a critique of the liberal concept of human beings according to which politics is the representation of ideas not linked to economic interests, opposing to this the concept of class-structured interests (Marx, 2018); second, a concept of conflictual social progress determined by the dynamics of the social relations of production, which represents social structure (Marx, 2017). For Marx, politics is a matter of classes confronted by their opposing interests, which they develop because of their positions in the process of production (Marx, 1998). In this way, the economic sphere in which the process of production takes place works as the social structure that configures subjects, determining their position in politics and the overall political life, which he calls 'superstructure'. The transcendent aspects of a subject's existence are in this way all linked to this structural determinant: they condition his interest, the part he takes in the class conflicts, and the future of society. The State and politics are, then, 'super-structural' phenomena, or what we call today a dependent variable.

In Marx, as in Durkheim, social reality is explained to a large extent by structural phenomena, or macro events determining micro ones. Also, there is an opposition between structure and culture: culture is a reflection of the structural relations of production, says Marx, and the liberalization of society is derived from a new social solidarity, as postulated by Durkheim. Although both authors take a different route in explaining how structures operate and sustain society, there is a shared acceptance of an imposed and even fatal nature of a part of social life for the subjects. Later theories took up this issue.

The acceptance of this concept of social structure remained more or less unchanged in the course of the discipline: the idea that some elements of social phenomena

transcend the capability of subjects to change their reality, and that this structural nature is linked in a dichotomous relation with the cultural production of society. That concept suffered an important turn with the advent of structural-functional theory in the works of Talcott Parsons. This change is related to the question about what produces social structure, and how that process takes place. It led, to a large extent, to an identification of culture and structure.

For Parsons, society is the interaction of individuals that seek maximum gratification in the context of both a cultural and a material world. However, he does not take the individuals or their interactions as the starting point. Instead, he defines 'status roles'; social positions that subjects occupy in order to play functions in the system, and which they internalize through the cultural guidelines that the society provides. Status roles for Parsons constitute social structures that are imposed on subjects through cultural guidelines, which determine their possibility of agency, their ambitions and rules for interaction. However, what is new in contrast to the previous structure theories mentioned is that here, structure results as a function of a cultural system. Status roles are an imposition on subjects in their socialization, but they do not exist before the social system; rather, they are a product of it, modeled by its functional needs. The needs of the social system in terms of reproduction, then, give place to the cultural determination of people's behavior that generates Parson's social structure as a set of 'status roles' (Parsons, 1999).

Although Parsons' disciple Robert Merton introduced notions of conflict to the structural functionalist conception of society, this previous turn in the understanding of the generation of social structures remained present in his works. An important part of Merton's work is focused on the dysfunctions that exist within the social system. In this way, structural functionalism loses part of its unilinear understanding of social phenomena according to which social systems effectively

generate and reproduce complete harmony among their components. One of his most famous topics is social anomie, which treats the problems derived from the limits that social structures can impose on the achievement of the cultural guidelines accepted by subjects (Merton, 1968: 209–74). However, the major aspects of the structural functionalist tradition to which Merton belongs are those postulated by Parsons. In this sense Merton, Parsons and the functionalist school overall were interpreted by their opponents as a ‘consensus’ social theory, under which structural change is difficult to explain and to expect. This void in the comprehensive potential of functionalism is what conflict theories of the 20th century, usually under Marxian influence, opposed and tried to supply. The works of Dahrendorf were emblematic among these (see Dahrendorf, 1959).

It can be seen that all the concepts of structure reviewed up to this point depend on the general theory of the authors mentioned. This complicates the dialogue between them, since it is a complete paradigm that is at stake. At the same time, it makes it difficult to open the debate to other disciplines and problems different from those addressed in sociology.

## TOWARDS AN OPEN CONCEPT OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Up to this point, social structure has been treated as an inherent problem for sociological theories. However, the argument developed so far lacks a concept of social structure around which a dialogue with political science can be created. According to Ritzer, this concept was revived during the 1970s as a reaction on the part of some sociologists to the culturalist turn in the discipline, highlighting the works of Peter Blau, which vindicate the study of social structure as the main purpose of sociology (Ritzer, 1993: 440). The particular relevance here lies in the explicit treatment of the concept of social

structure as ‘the discernible patterns of social life, the observable regularities, the detected configurations’ and, more precisely, as ‘the distributions of population according to diverse parameters in different social positions that influence the relations of roles of the people and social interaction’ (Blau, 1975a: 3). This idea of social structure, and the postulation of it as the principal topic of sociology, conflicts with the Parsonian and systemic approaches, since their main interest resides in cultural or idiosyncratic determinants of social phenomena (Blau, 1975b).

The idea of social structure refers to what is beyond the will of subjects and imposes on them – consciously or unconsciously, in different ways – objective conditions that determine their possible actions as guidelines as well as limits. This is the notion that Blau emphasizes in his definition of social structure. Its advantage is that it is not bound to any long-range theory,<sup>2</sup> but precisely that is what implies difficulties in talking of ‘a’ social structure and defining a particular role for it in the unfolding of social reality. Instead, ‘the structural problem’ emerges as a dimension in all social phenomena which must be elucidated in every study. This seems to be a better concept for a dialogue between the concepts of structure in sociology and political science, because it helps to shield against the risk of domination of political problems by sociological explanations, which is Sartori’s worry (Sartori, 1969).

In this dialogue between sociology’s elaborations of structure and political science, it is useful to conceive the problem as ‘the structural’ (instead of ‘the structure’). This allows to consider the structural dimension in the study of any problem, but without a delimited concept of structure, which also probably would involve a complete social theory and the obligation to deal with most of its premises. In fact, returning to Blau, he refers to socioeconomic stratification, gender and race as structural determinants, but also gives definitions that make it possible to consider other structural variables in ways that

specific social formations may require. This allows the development of several linkages that sociological theories tend to establish between social structures and political dimensions, like the ones that we will consider later.

Even if in current studies sociologists still tend to assume the idea of structural conditioning of social phenomena, there are, however, doubts about the possibility of isolating these structures, their nature and their consequences, due to the changes they have experienced. This means that in a social group affected by the same structures (class is the most typical example), several other variables, usually cultural ones, differentiate the community supposed to have similar characteristics, reducing the intensity of collective life and consequently changing collective action (Touraine, 1998). As the cause of this turn in the dynamics of social structure, we can point to the advent of post-industrial societies, with a more intense individual, cultural life, generating more distance between the individual subject and the collective (Garretón, 2015). One of the most powerful descriptions of this phenomenon refers to hybrid cultures and the instability that they exhibit in the globalized world (García Canclini, 2005). Although it can be said that cultures have always been 'hybrid', the instability and diversification that they actually show is one of the ways to explain the fragmentation that social structures today manifest, expressed in the diverse courses that groups under their influence can take.

The idea developed here about social structure based on Blau's concept seems to fit better with the emergent questions cited above, and to be more useful than those set out in classical theories. In this sense it opens the possibility that there is no universal and complete determinism of the structure over action, that there are different definitions of social structures according to each society and that other aspects of society must be empirically analyzed. This shows how social structure affects politics in very different ways, as we will see later. Finally, it takes into account what are presumably the same

problems of social complexity that today's studies consider when talking of 'postmaterialist values' (Inglehart, 1985),<sup>3</sup> globalization (Calderón, 2004), new social movements (Wickham-Crowley and Eckstein, 2017) and crises of representation (Garretón et al., 2003), among other current topics.

## AGENTS, SUBJECTS AND ACTION

The main question that the concept of social structure must answer is about the relation between structure and actors or subjects, that is, how its explanations leave space for agency and subjects. Here lies the crucial importance of the concept for politics. In sociology, a social-structural approach could be opposed to those referring to individuals' capacity of action. This has led to several debates as to when or how, in social phenomena, it is individuals or structures that hold the key to an explanation. Summarizing this debate, Margaret Archer points to typical solutions at which sociologists have arrived, highlighting what she calls a common 'conflationist' fallacy. She refers to theories that overestimate the importance of one dimension (the agent or the structure) in the explanation of social events. There, she points to three paths of 'conflation': ascendant, when agency is understood as the unique source of explanation; descendant, when each explanation lies in the structure; and central, when the specificity of structure and agency are ignored, and social events are comprehended as a diffuse amalgam that simplifies the complexity of social reality which includes these two different poles (Archer, 1995).

Instead, Archer proposes a 'realistic' theory that recognizes the specificity and relative autonomy of both the structure and the subjects. This understanding assumes the existence of social structure as a concrete, relatively autonomous entity that conditions the possibilities for subjects to act. However, she also recognizes the autonomy of subjects,

given a certain structural context, to act according to a large spectrum of possibilities or certain degrees of freedom (Archer, 2003).

This implies rejection of Durkheim's postulates, according to which social facts must be studied as 'objective', 'concrete' phenomena that impose on subjects something from which they cannot escape (Durkheim, 1982). According to Archer, this is a 'descendant conflation' (Archer, 2003). The same applies for Marx' precepts that locate in the social relations of production the configuration of the social being as well as the motor of social transformations (or history). The Parsonian response to the problem is also dismissed by Archer, as it proposes that systems are all guided by the same logic, no matter whether the individual system or the cultural one.

'Central conflation' emerges mainly as the attempt of theories to overcome the polarized solutions that focus on agents or structures. However, this also amounts, according to Archer, to a fallacy. A social theory should recognize that social reality is composed of a variety of elements and the homologation of their nature, as with central conflation, tends to obscure problems more than clarify them. Two examples of this are Bourdieu's and Giddens' proposals, two theories of action that became very relevant but are also criticized by Archer. In the case of Pierre Bourdieu's theory, it is assumed that social structure carries a logic, a 'doxa',<sup>4</sup> that agents (the author avoids the concept of 'subject') internalize in the process of socialization through practical experience (Bourdieu, 1998). After this, the acts of agents are guided by this 'doxa' and, later, new structures will be mainly elaborated by agents previously configured according to the 'doxa' of previous structures. If this is so, the possibility of agents to act independently of structures (not just reproducing inherited dynamics) is eliminated, and with it the difference between these entities. That is what Archer denounces as a fallacy of central conflation.

The case is similar for Giddens. He declares his purpose to be that of overcoming

the agency–structure dualism, mainly with a theory of structures that conceives them as constructed through human actions and relations (Giddens, 1979). The problem continues to be the need to draw a limit on structure's constraints on agency without ignoring it, and the possibilities that this has to affect the former, regarding a space of 'freedom' that structures leave for agents. When talking of structures, the mentioned ascendant conflation does not apply, as this concept basically ignores the structural dimension.

The relevance of Archer's concept of structure and agency is emphasized here because of the connection it can make between social theories and political dimensions – particularly theories of cleavage, as we will see in the next section. The conflictive relation between structure and agency makes space for several explanations of the political dynamics. In this way the role that structure plays in determining the configuration of politics and the role of agents can be considered, as well as the inverse case, in which agents (voters, social groups or political elites) are more relevant as an explanatory factor of the phenomena. These considerations acquire more relevance when taking into account the problems of diversification and fragmentation of social structure previously mentioned. In the context of fragmented social structure and hybrid cultures, the one-causality explanations tend to be more improbable to describe social reality, and then Archer's proposals emerge as a better alternative.

Accordingly, the middle-range sociological concept of the 'socio-political matrix', used for analysis and comparison of the Latin American configuration of national states, illustrates how sociological studies can both connect social theory and political studies. The concept is an attempt to describe the dynamics of articulation generated in Latin American societies between the state, social groups and political parties with regard to structural constraints such as the socio-cultural and economic basis of the society, all of these being mediated by the political



regime (Garretón et al., 2003). Starting from that concept, several studies have considered the effects of globalization, hybrid cultures and fragmentary structure on politics (Garretón, 2002; García Canclini, 2005). As will be seen, this constraint on the type of link that society and politics sustain is also a conditioning of social structure (or its fragmentation) over the nature of cleavage politics.

The perspective on social structure drawn here seems to be coherent with contemporary transformations in society, recognizing the limits and guidelines it imposes for agents, and it sheds light on the roles that particular agency events play. It is also a historically grounded framework, open to the role and relevance that every element acquires in different cases – in particular, the increasing complexity of society which today places in question sociological structure theories and also, as we will see, cleavage studies.

## SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND POLITICS

As we have said, the definition of social structure that we have adopted allows us to establish several linkages between the sociological perspective and political dimensions of society. In this sense, one of the main concepts that can establish the dialogue between sociology's structural elaborations and political science has been the concept of cleavage.

Lipset and Rokkan (1967) set out the concept of cleavage politics in their work 'Party Systems and Voter Alignments'. Studying the democracies of Western Europe, the authors postulated as a hypothesis that party systems had 'frozen' around a few major social-structural cleavages. These were generated by historical events and processes that divided these societies. One example is the 'class cleavage' opposing capital and labor, or the bourgeoisie and the working classes in Marx' terms, as a result of the industrial revolution. These became organized in employers' associations and trade unions as well as

in conservative and socialist/social democratic parties. One expression of this is the classic left-right dimension in many contemporary party systems (Seiler, Chapter 33, this *Handbook*). In this first development of the concept, the link with social structure ideas is obvious, since social determinants – class or geographical distribution of the population, for example – are pointed to as key to understanding the behavior of the electorate.

In that first elaboration by Lipset and Rokkan, political alignments were conceived as an epiphenomenon of conflictive structural processes, and the cleavage was the concept that explained the relation between both. At the same time, as analyzed by Bartolini and Mair (1990), a cleavage was constituted by three components: first, a social (structural) fissure; second, social institutions that expressed and mobilized that conflict; and third, as a result of the previous two, party alignments. After a first moment of social unrest, political conflicts tend to become 'frozen' and work around that social fissure and their social institutional expression.

However, the dynamic of this cleavage evolved into a more complex relation. Political parties were, after their freezing around this issue, capable of reviving the conflict or, in more theoretical terms, susceptible to agency over the cleavage and its development. This last point operated in later studies as the door to a diversification of the cleavage concept.

In fact, the first elaborations of the cleavage concept proposed by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) have experienced many changes susceptible to comparison to the social structure debate. The authors first defined particular social structures that explain political confrontations (class, center-periphery, rural-urban<sup>5</sup>) as sources of socio-political conflicts. However, there are others that emerged in the later cleavage studies, such as socioeconomic and professional differentiation, gender, ethnic diversity and age groups, which only a flexible concept of social structure, and the considerations about its fragmentation, can cover.

The theoretical framework behind the cleavage concept has tended to disperse at the point at which the empirical foundations have become the main topic of debate, acquiring a more flexible definition for the characterization of each case studied (Lybeck, 1985). In later studies this framework proved to have shortcomings, particularly in post-dictatorship contexts where the political (not 'structural') cleavage of authoritarianism versus democracy birthed new party systems, as well as in its use for the Eastern European democracies after the end of the Soviet Union (Enyedi, 2005).

But it was not only the incorporation of new cases that represented a challenge for cleavage studies. The social changes that both Western and Eastern European countries experienced created a new political dynamic, which was condensed in the concept of 'post-materialist values' as a conflict that was no longer rooted in a social structure (or was not so in the same way) as the classical cleavages (Inglehart, 1977, 1985).

This led to debate, based on empirical evidence, around the pertinence of the concept of cleavages for the study of political dynamics. In political science, this proposal had at first been an object of criticism, with rejection of the influence over politics that it attributed to social structure (Sartori, 1969). The empirical evidence, however, took the discussion to another level. Basically, there were too many new and old cases that had now experienced change, that offered little or no evidence of the close relation between social structure and political conflicts as postulated in cleavage theory. The difficulties of standardizing a methodology to measure cleavages across a diversity of cases and the historical nature of the theory made it difficult to remake the theoretical framework in order to apply it to this new context. Instead, an internal decomposition of its minor elements took place, alongside diversification in its application.

In this way, studies opened up the option of cleavages based more on recent social fissures and divisions generated in society by the political parties (Przeworski and Sprague, 1986).

This could be called a politics-centered solution, as this gives a preponderant role to agency in the political sphere in order to explain the course that the cleavage takes. In addition, there can be a 'societal' or a 'vis-à-vis' solution (Torcal and Mainwaring, 2003). The first remains loyal to the sociologically based theory postulated by Lipset and Rokkan and continues to attribute the most important part of the explanation of political cleavage to the social conflicts and their mobilization (Rose, 1968). The latter gives more autonomy to the political sphere than the traditional Lipset and Rokkan analysis, but without rejecting the importance of social phenomena as conditioning the agency of politics (Knutsen and Scarbrough, 1998, 2003; Bartolini and Mair, 1990).

There is, however, another dimension of this debate, which refers not to the role of each pole of the cleavage (the social structure and the political sphere), but to the components that constitute it. The politics-centered solution not only gives a special place to the political conflict in creating a social fissure, but can also lead to an explanation of party competition that is not based on societal dynamics. Therefore, the cleavage studies had to be opened to the analysis of cases where only evidence for 'less than a cleavage' can be found. That means that not all the basic components needed to describe a cleavage may exist. The most typical cases of this are the 'position divide', where politics and political behavior are in conflict around a topic without a basis in social institutions, and the 'issue divide', where a social institution does not correspond to a structural social fissure (Deegan-Krause, 2007). Given that opening to 'less than a cleavage', the traditional concept of cleavage, constituted by the components present in the works of Lipset and Rokkan, can be called a 'full cleavage' (Deegan-Krause, 2007: 3).

In sum, studies tended to adhere more and more to the politics-centered explanation of cleavages. The evidence showed the growing importance of the political sphere's



autonomy in the most socially articulated cases (Franklin, 1992). At the same time, there was evidence that, even when structural determinations of political preferences were found, these were expressed more in the form of differences of opinions or ideas than in compact isolated social groups, as with the classic cleavages (Kriesi, 1998).

This shift is not isolated from reflections that have been made in sociology referring to the emergence of amplified social reflectivity (Giddens, 1979), the consequent difficulties for a general narrative that articulates politics as a form of social coexistence (Touraine, 1998) and its repercussions for national states (Garretón, 2015). Most of them are susceptible to be framed in the problem of hybridization (García Canclini, 2005). All of this constitutes reflections about the complexity that social and political phenomena progressively acquire and the difficulty of finding linear relations between these spheres, as classical cleavage theory did. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, for sociology, social structure can, in some cases, be hard to isolate in time and space. The described context tends to enforce that fact. While there is an understanding of how social structure is present and determines social dynamics, it is impossible to observe it acting by itself, not interlaced with other structures or phenomena.

At the same time, there must be consideration of how the mentioned social transformations, which create new problems for cleavage studies and social theory, not only weaken traditional structures but can also make space for new ones. Globalization serves as a good example. While it intensifies the hybridization of cultures, weakening the expression of structural determinants in social collectives, it generates new ways of conditioning social phenomena because of the economic and political factors that become stronger in this process (Calderón, 2004). The case of Brexit and the rise of right-wing populism has generated a debate around its causes that gives great importance to this new type of constraint (Inglehart and Norris, 2016).

The same debate is also a good example of the crisis of representative democracies at the level of the nation State, due to the several identities and demands that they have to process and their limited range of action to confront global phenomena (Touraine, 1998; Rosanvallon, 2008).

However, this is not sufficient to say, as the supporters of the 'end of cleavages' thesis do (Franklin, 1992), that social structure does not still have an influence on political phenomena. The diversification of social structures, which cannot be expressed in simple polarized groups, still affects political conflicts in more subtle ways (Enyedi, 2008). If the changes in social structure explain most of the political shifts that lowered the intensity of cleavages (Rose, 1968; Kelley et al., 1984), this is still a structural influence on the political sphere. Due to the complexity that social structure progressively acquires, the problem lies, rather than giving up its relation with politics, in opening the theory and searching for more diversified measurements.

## THE CHALLENGE OF NEW DIMENSIONS

For cleavage studies, the social structure dimension has become a problem since this last one starts to diversify and complexify, hindering the track down of its influence over politics (Rose, 1968; Kelley et al., 1984). Besides the problems that these changes in social structure have brought up, scholars have also seen an enrichment of the cultural sphere of Western societies. That has given to culture preponderance in the explanation of political conflicts and alignments, as happens with the already mentioned 'postmaterialist values' conflicts (Inglehart, 1985), all in detriment of the classic, structurally-rooted cleavage concept (Oddbjörn & Scarbrough, 2003). But as we have seen, post-materialist values can have a structural explanation for their emergence, and therefore at least the hypothesis of a structural determination

that they take in a given context must be admitted (Kriesi, 1998).

We must also consider new issues apart from the central fissures that characterized traditional cleavages. The first topic that should be analyzed is the *gender* problem. This intersects the current cleavage problems on all its levels, affecting at least half of the population (Risman, 2004). The structural character of gender lies in its power to determine several aspects of life, from the way people access the job market (or not) to the roles assumed in the division of household labor. There is evidence of the relevance of gender in political alignments. During the 1980s, in Western democracies women tended to vote more conservatively, which was mostly explained by the different relationships that women and men had with labor and religion (de Vaus and McAllister, 1989). A few decades later, the transformation in gender roles and other changes inverted the gender gap in voting, showing women to have a more leftist preference than men in Western democracies (Inglehart and Norris, 2000). Given this evidence, and regarding the differences with the classic cleavage studies, it can be said that gender as structure can determine political alignments in every context. Going further, for the cases used as examples, it could be hypothesized that the changing relationship between women and the construction of nation (Yuval-Davis, 1998) can explain this change from conservative to left-wing voting. If the hypothesis is correct, it shows how, even for such a powerful structure as gender, other structures have to be highlighted to understand the configuration of a cleavage. It also indicates how a change in social structure does not necessarily directly or only affect the dynamic of cleavage, but also affects the context in which cleavages unfold. In this case, the way in which women relate the social sphere to politics by acquiring a different social status is relevant to understand not only a later change in the cleavage, but also the change in the type of political agencies of which they are capable.

However, as opposed to the case just explained, it must be remembered that opening a theoretical approach that considers this linkage between social structure and political alignments does not always mean looking at the constitution of a cleavage; it can also mean looking only at parts of it (Deegan-Krause, 2007), in which case the relation we are describing has much more explanatory power. In other words, discarding the cleavage hypothesis does not necessarily mean discarding structural determination altogether. This can help to understand why it is that, while gender structures explain much of the participation in gender struggles, as can be seen in the preponderantly female composition of feminist mobilizations or voting, they do not structure the entire party system as the classical cleavages studied by Lipset and Rokkan did. This can also be said of other dimensions, which have effects on what has been called a crisis of party representation.

A different case of structural determination that must be addressed concerns indigenous populations or *ethnic* conditions. The first difference between this factor and gender lies in the differing weights that this condition acquires in a particular society, while gender always has the same importance in social structure (Hayes et al., 2000). The condition's potential as a determinant of political alignments depends on this weight in a given society. An example of this can be seen by comparing the Ecuadorian and Bolivian cases. While in Ecuador around 7% of the population belong to an indigenous culture, this number reaches 40% among the population of Bolivia. The case of Bolivia is a powerful example of the potential for ethnic factors to generate a strong cleavage in local and national politics (Guzmán and Rodríguez, 2018). Here the indigenous population not only has unusual strength in explaining voting behavior and determining elections; it has also constituted a long-lasting social movement, which has sustained the government of Evo Morales over three terms and started several democratic reforms that reconfigured its relation with the State (Gamboa Rocabado, 2010).

In the context of crisis confronted by 'full cleavage' theories, it is necessary to ask why indigenous movements are sufficiently strong to be configured as a cleavage of this type, as in the Bolivian case. The answer may lie in the more traditional, less hybrid structures of that society, and especially in the indigenous communities that serve as a basis for the movement. If it is assumed that the phenomena of globalization, for example, tend to fragment social structure and weaken its link with politics (Garretón, 2015), it is possible to expect greater strength of the ties that link this social basis with the political sphere. Besides, a more homogeneous community, without the social dispersion generated by hybridization (García Canclini, 2005) and modernity's fragmentation (Touraine, 1998), can give more strength to social conflicts due to the strong membership of subjects in their social groups, and then give more substance to the cleavage.

The ethnic condition has also given place to an indigenous movement in Ecuador, but one with less strength than in Bolivia. In terms of electoral power and reform programs, the ethnic cleavage tends to occupy a less important place in Ecuador than in Bolivia (Lalander and Gustafsson, 2008). However, it is interesting to see that while the relevance of both indigenous movements varies, they correspond in both cases to what has been called a 'full cleavage', in the sense that they are composed by a social fissure, generate a social closure and express themselves in political choices. This sheds light on the complexity of social processes that must be apprehended by political cleavage studies. They can identify the components of a determined cleavage – or 'something less than a cleavage' (Deegan-Krause, 2007: 26) – but an overview of a given political context must realize the several cleavages that can compose it. For example, although the indigenous cleavage can be studied in Ecuador, it obviously does not explain the most important part of the political alignments in the country.

Another interesting debate refers to the place of social structure in post-materialist

political conflicts, which experienced a boom with the emergence of new social movements (Inglehart, 1990). The main theory concerning this problem explains that, even when post-materialist problems are in fact structurally rooted, they are disputed at discursive levels so abstract that only certain factions of class structures get involved in the conflicts (Habermas, 1981; Offe, 1985). Empirical studies have shown these tendencies in some cases, where a 'new' middle class shows more sympathy for new social movements articulated around post-materialist values (Kriesi, 1989). In this sense, 'post-materialist conflict' seems to need a 'materialist' or 'structural' base if it is accepted (as some evidence shows) that they tend to emerge where a strong educated middle class exists, especially if the traditional working class loses strength. For the same reason, the translation of this problematique to Latin America and other developing countries is not automatic and the causes tend to vary from those seen in the first world. In the Third World, post-materialist conflicts tend to mix with material and structural conflicts due to the hybridization of local cultures in the context of globalization, or due to the cultural exclusion which also carries material implications (Wickham-Crowley and Eckstein, 2017).

Translating this to the cleavage politics problem, two relevant issues emerge. First is the question about the possibilities of a cleavage configured around these topics to acquire strength and involve a social basis, when the interest in conflicts of this kind depends on the educational level of the electorate. The risk of elitization of politics is obvious, and the configuration of the cleavage probably will not imply a social fissure. Second is the change in the social composition of the electorate for parties who appeal to this topic. In fact, for Kelley et al. (1984) the decline of the working class forced left-wing parties to embrace post-materialist conflicts, recruiting members and voters of different social extractions. Similar tendencies are studied by Knutsen (1990) in the Norwegian case.

Given the described characteristics of these conflicts and the elitization of politics that they entail, it is not hard to imagine that here lies a clue to understand the right turn of working classes in some countries, linked to conservative parties for ideological or clientelistic reasons, but distanced from the left (Oesch, 2008).

A historical process, then, can be seen in the background of the dynamic highlighted by cleavage politics. It is understood that although the essential aspect of a cleavage study lies in identification of the roles that the three main components (i.e. a social-structural fissure, social institutions and party alignments) play, this also needs to be complemented by other cultural or historical considerations that allow a better understanding of the processes studied. In fact, this is what most studies do when trying to comprehend a concrete cleavage dynamic: they review the previous cleavages that took place in the political system already mentioned, the strategies of political elites (Enyedi, 2005) and/or structural changes experienced in the country (Kelley et al., 1984).

This is why it can be said that while cleavage studies are necessary, they are not enough for the full understanding of a given political process. In this regard, Latin American societies, particularly in their 20th-century political developments, must be mentioned. When contrasted with Western democracies they exhibit characteristics that cannot be fully comprehended by cleavage studies. In particular, the role that the State had in Latin America is different, but it also generated and modified social structures. This situation, which has created a symbiosis between the State and diverse subjects, requires broader study, as proposed in the socio-political matrix approach (Garretón et al., 2003). In fact, some processes of cleavage disarticulation in this context can be well understood through this approach, which considers structural, cultural and political transformations that determine the ways in which political alignments are generated (Garretón, 2014).

Therefore, there is a need to complement cleavage studies with ad hoc approaches for a better understanding of the given phenomena.

## **POLITICAL REGIMES, STATE, GLOBALIZATION, SOCIAL CHANGE**

The described problem of social structure and the current discussion in sociology about its political implications exceeds the concept of cleavage with which political science has opened this dialogue. There are several other concerns about politics that have called the attention of sociologists when studying social structure.

An example of this could be the relation in sociology between social structure and political regimes. This has been postulated since Marx' studies of feudal economic and political regimes and his comparison with 'bourgeois democracy' (Marx, 1998), and is also present in Barrington Moore's studies on the relation between political regimes and socioeconomic conditions (Moore, 1966). The long-lasting nature of this linkage in sociology can be traced even in Latin America. The most influential works of the region's sociology during the 1970s, the dependency theories, studied how the economic configuration of the region gave place to certain types of State, with the inclusion and exclusion of social actors in the rising democracies (Cardoso and Faletto, 1979). Therefore, it is seen as a constraint that social structures, in class and economic terms, impose on the types of political regime. In fact, almost all the debates about the type of democracy during the 20th century in the region are crossed by the study of the type of economic regime, its duality (with a modern and an almost feudal type of production based in the agrarian and mining export sectors) and the range of action for change provided to the political regime based on those conditions (CEPAL, 1963). Those elaborations understood economic development not as linear progress, but as a conflicted process in

which actors were more or less favored by the possible types of development depending on their social status in the structure, which at the same time gave them different possibilities for political action and change. It was impossible, then, to understand the type of democracies and states without understanding social structure. Related to this is the problematization of populism as a way of incorporating new sectors of the population into modern society and democracy (Di Tella, 1965; Germani, 1973).

Also, during the 1980s, discussion about democratic transitions considered the limits set out by the economic sphere as a structural determination acting over the desirable new regime (O'Donnell, 1979). In that period, even the tendencies that rejected Marxism and stopped arguing in favor of the predominance of the material conditions 'in the last instance' continued to ask about the relation between social structure and possible political regimes (Garretón, 1989). These complexities can be considered not only due to the diverse conditions that social structure tends to put in place over politics, but also for the discussion on the cleavage concept which it creates. In fact, the transition of democracies in Latin America has in some cases generated cleavages that articulate the problem of the type of political regime preferred after the end of dictatorship (Tironi and Agüero, 1999; Valenzuela, 1999). For a sociology that problematizes the dependency on social structure of the type of political regime, this is more than just a problem of political alignments, and opens a very rich and complex field of study.

There are some examples of other political phenomena that cannot be understood without reference to social structure. Among them can be mentioned globalization and the generation of new local, national or transnational structures; the nature of the State as agent of development or as the space of domination or compromise between actors; social change as revolution or reforms; emancipation of the 'oppression structures' mainly, not exclusively, when it is considered as a criticism of patriarchal structures and

the need to overcome them (Yuval-Davis, 1998); and social movements emerging from a structure or as a political creation to overcome the structure, or installation of democracy as breakdown of dictatorship. However, structure by itself is unable to provide all the required explanations for these problems. In this sense, in the current social structure debate, the empirical discussion has discovered more complexities for which the Blau concept is still useful, but not enough for its comprehension.

## CONCLUSION

The reviewed dilemmas that current social structure theories represent for political studies, point to the need of an extended concept of social structure and social agency from which these studies can nourish. This, without seeing their approaches restricted by the limits that long-range social theories can implicate. This is a main issue to look for a dialogue between sociology and its notions about social structure, on one side, and political science with its studies of political alignments, e.g., on the other.

It is necessary, while considering the contributions made by the long-range social theories, to look forward, to rescue the possible forms that social structure can take along their precepts. In this way, one can evade a definitive, rigid concept of social structure or social agency, but have general and diverse guidelines regarding the possible explicative power of that concept in the study of a particular phenomenon. Although the criticism can be raised that this threatens the consistency of the theoretical approach, what is won is the possibility of dialogue with political science without adhering to the definitions of that discipline.

In this sense, more than choosing a definitive concept of social structure or a definitive social theory that includes that concept, what is proposed here is to exploit the variations



that this problem has experienced in social theory as a toolbox. In that way, the conflictive notion of Marxist social structure can aid an understanding of some historical moments of rising social tension and consequent politicization, and the opposing 'consensus theory' of Parsons could allow an understanding of the adequacy or 'discipline' of certain social actors under a political regime.

What seems to be the consensus around the problem of social structure is the idea of long-lasting elements, in relation to subjective wills that are imposed in a given society. This could be interpreted as material conditions as well as political institutions, cultural values or several other elements. With the flexible and open concept of structure in favor of which we have argued, a hypothetical social structure can have economic, social, cultural and political dimensions,<sup>6</sup> or can refer only to one of these dimensions. In social dynamics, this structure penetrates and interrelates, while conserving degrees of autonomy depending on the case. The theoretical articulation between them under what has been called the 'socio-political matrix' (Garretón et al., 2003) can serve as a flexible concept of structure that rescues the diverse sociological contributions made around that concept, as well as face the different, complex problems that emerge today in political sociology.

This way of dealing with theory supports not only dialogue with political science, but also the study of contradictory, more heterodox and multi-conditioned phenomena in politics through the view of sociology. Currently, as seen in this chapter, globalization processes limits the agencies of State as well as it diversifies the different identities that lies under them, through the acceleration of cultural hybridization. This implies on one side the narrowing of national states action margin, and the widening of the type of demands made by the population on the other. To these effects of globalization, it must be summed the progressive complexity that class structures acquires, as it gives

place to multipolar conflicts. In this context, the study of national politics turns too complex for a systematical theoretical approach as the classical cleavage theories looked for. Middle-range theory and flexible concepts are not a definitive answer, but are at least a better way of asking the questions.

Last but not least, this seems to be the only way of rescuing a sociological approach to the current debate around cleavage politics. The first cleavage studies of Lipset and Rokkan relied on a determined, but not explicit, understanding of the relation between social structure and agency. In this regard, it was assumed that social structure had a great influence on political agency, expressed also in social life (through social closure and institutions kept active by structurally determined subjects) and in political expressions through party alignments. As explained above, this mechanism was later weakened. The big question, therefore, was and still is: If there exists a structural determination of political alignment, how does it work, and how do the changes in the way it influences political phenomena affect what was called cleavage politics? Obviously, this question gets more complex as social structures fragment and as the identities that it used to produce disperse in the context of globalization and the boom of new means of communication.

The complexity acquired by social structures in most of the cases studied points to the weakening of previous strong cleavages. Better living standards and higher educational levels tend to decrease the direct determination of social structure over subjective aspects and, consequently, agency. However, in this respect some considerations in favor of structural factors must be made. First, the structural character of educational levels and well-being implies structural differentiation and the presence these factors can still have in parts of the population. Second, the structural character's being part of post-materialist values through levels of education and professions associated with them implies their presence as well. What has changed, then,



is the strength that structure had, in the first cleavage studies, to manifest direct influence on political agency. The hypothesis of influence in given cases must not be discarded, however, but rather modified. Finally, the opening of new structural aspects not previously considered has turned out to be necessary in this context.

With reference to agency, the discussion of cleavages gave emphasis to the role of elites in cleavage formation and maintenance. This implies a return to the political science approach in the same way that the sociological concept was involved in Lipset and Rokkan's works, where the dynamics of political parties and actors can be as powerful as social processes in determined contexts. That is why a concept of social agency according to current cleavage studies must be as open to the study of social movements as it is to the capacity of political elites. In this respect, the possibility must also be considered that, in the political dimension of cleavages and the dynamics that only involve their political elite's agents, low democracy logics are generated (Gills and Rocamora, 1992), and, therefore, a lower strength of the socio-political articulation. The problem here is to study how social conflicts relate to politics that cannot always process them (Ruiz, 2015). This could also explain the de-politicization that some Latin American democracies experienced during the reconstruction of socio-political links after authoritarian rule – a reconstruction in which political elites usually played a major role (Garretón et al., 2003).

There are more explanations for political conflicts than are expressed in the traditional cleavage scheme. This cleavage perspective, however, has important comparative potential and therefore can be employed for this purpose while being supplemented with other approaches for a deeper understanding of given cases. The diverse hypotheses discussed here regarding changes in social and political dynamics oblige us to consider new factors, not previously taken into account, that operate in and over cleavage politics.

And this, among other shifts, leads cleavage theories to articulate their scheme of political conflicts with post-materialist and new issues (Offe, 1985). Therefore, the question emerges whether it is necessary for cleavage studies to be open to this problem to apprehend the nature of today's politics, as an expression of new social articulations that can give place to political alignments. If this option is chosen, then it is imperative to return to sociology for cleavage studies.

In sum, the main conclusion of this chapter is that it is important to open the theoretical framework on social structure, agency and actors and cleavage politics to different historically situated hypotheses in every case, in opposition to the idea of the disappearing influence of social structure, or closure of the debate on some fixed political concepts.

## Notes

- 1 However, it must be said that in Marx' works structure is at the same time the steady component that limits the possible agencies and events in a given context, and the engine of the social processes of change.
- 2 In the words of Merton, Blau's concept of social structure tends to be more like a 'middle range theory' (Merton, 1968), useful to study cases but without the background of a comprehensive social explanation.
- 3 The concept of post-materialist values or post-materialist conflicts points to the idea of values or conflicts not centered on material conditions of life or determined by them. However, the notion of non materialist based conflicts was already present almost a century ago in the work of Gramsci, among others, where conflicts not only based on the material world or immediately economic are mentioned (Gramsci, 1992). The 'post' prefix in the concept can imply an evolutionist perspective that is hard to share. Nevertheless, it will be used here because it has been part of the commonly used language of the reviewed debate, and its discussion would exceed the objective and extension of this chapter.
- 4 For a better comprehension of Bourdieu's ideas here, it can help to point out that when talking of the 'doxa' structuring social camps, the author has affirmed that he was looking for a different concept than 'ideology' (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1991).

- 5 Although Lipset and Rokkan propose a fourth cleavage, the one between Church and State, it is doubtful whether this can be considered as a social structural determinant as defined here.
- 6 That is the case, for example, for traditional economies where economic relations depend on cultural constraints that determine very specific roles in economic institutions (Habermas, 1975).

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