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Edited by Craig Calhoun, Marshall W. Meyer and W. Richard Scott

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## Introduction: Peter Blau's sociological structuralism

CRAIG CALHOUN AND W. RICHARD SCOTT

Postwar American sociology has gone through many transformations, seen dramatic growth, survived, and indeed gained energy from, several penetrating disputes. One of the most striking changes has been the decline of the functionalist paradigm dominant in the 1950s and early 1960s. It has not been replaced by any new hegemonic approach to sociological inquiry, but forced to share the stage with a wide range of competing perspectives. There is now even a "neofunctionalism" to take its place among numerous contending theoretical orientations. The authors and chapters in this book exemplify this theoretical diversity. Their contributions are linked, however, by common involvement with the work of Peter Blau and his enduring theme of how social structures simultaneously empower and constrain social action.

Contemporary structural sociology grew in large part out of the functionalism of the 1950s. Certainly, social structure was significant to Talcott Parsons, and Robert Merton (along with anthropologists like Evans-Pritchard, Fortes, Nadel, Gluckman, and others in the tradition of Radcliffe-Brown) actually termed his approach "structural-functionalism." In the 1950s and early 1960s, however, a methodologically independent approach to social structure was pioneered which took its practitioners well beyond the functionalist paradigm. This was true of network researchers like Barnes and Mitchell in anthropology and Laumann in sociology. It was true of students of formal organizational structure and of those like Hawley and Duncan who took a more ecological or demographic approach to social organization. A common thread running through these early efforts in structural analysis was the attempt to account for social organization without the reference to values so characteristic of Parsonsian functionalism. Rather, the focus was on formal attributes of populations and patterns of relationships. Among the claimed advantages

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of this approach was a greater “objectivity” and a capacity for operationalization in empirical research. No one was more central to this movement than Peter Blau.

That this should turn out to be so might actually have surprised some of the readers of Blau’s earliest sociologist works. From *The Dynamics of Bureaucracy* (1955) through *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (1964) Blau’s early books were criticized by some reviewers for an excessively individualistic, interpersonal or “microsociological” perspective, and inattention to larger scale social structures. By 1985, by contrast, Blau could be criticized by Giddens as the chief protagonist of a structuralism insufficiently attentive (in his view virtually completely inattentive) to the “action” side of the “action/structure” continuum. Blau’s position did indeed change a great deal; by the 1970s, in fact, a later Peter Blau had become a sharp critic of the earlier Peter Blau. Central to this transformation was his changing answer to the question of whether it was necessary that macrostructural sociological theory be constructed (even in principle) on the basis of microfoundations. That the interpersonal level should provide the basis for explaining activities and structures at higher levels of aggregation, levels which incorporated the lower level phenomena along with certain emergent properties, was a central philosophical-methodological tenet underlying *Exchange and Power in Social Life*. But Blau explicitly repudiated this position as he developed his approach to parameters of social structure for his 1974 presidential address to the American Sociological Association (see also Blau, 1986, 1987).<sup>1</sup>

Along with change, there is also continuity. A recurrent theme throughout Blau’s work has been his concern for discovering the ways in which external patterns of social relations constrain individual activity, on the one hand, and at the same time make possible particular individual strategies of action on the other. Blau’s exchange theory, widely criticized as excessively individualistic, avoided focusing on the psychological motives or processes of calculation of individuals. A central reason for its borrowing from marginalist economics was to show how such extraindividual and objectively observable social factors as the supply of recognized expertise in a work group influence such individual behavior as seeking or giving advice. Though it shared some assumptions with other versions of rational choice theory, both before and since, Blau’s theory was distinctive in stressing not the decision making of the individual actor (though he dealt a good deal with that) but the strategic implications of particular patterns of relationships. That is, Blau did not simply attempt to build up from the postulated interests or revealed preferences of individuals to an analysis of aggregates, but to study the impact of aggregate

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structure and individuals' positions within such structure on individual and group behavior.

This theme of structural empowerment and constraint not only runs through Blau's work, but helps to shape a number of major debates within sociology at large. In this introductory essay, we will focus on Blau's contributions to and changing positions in two such debates: the dispute over whether macrosociology requires micro-foundations, and the controversy over attempts to relate social structure to human action. Before we do so, however, there is another general feature of Blau's work to note: his approach to sociological theory and research.

**The relationship of theory to research**

In 1959, during the hegemony of Parsonsian functionalism and the rise of quantitative empirical methods to dominance, C. Wright Mills criticized prevailing trends in American sociology. Generations of students, frustrated by Parsons' opacity or the triviality of much empirical research, have delighted in discovering Mills' portrayal of how real substantive excitement had been driven out of sociology by the twin evils of grand theory and abstracted empiricism. Obviously, Mills' critique has some accurate bite. But already when Mills wrote, Peter Blau had begun to achieve distinction in a sociological career which perhaps more than any other managed to combine theory building and empirical research directed toward nontrivial social phenomena.<sup>2</sup> Blau, influenced partly by Merton, explicitly eschewed the Parsonsian attempt at grand theoretical synthesis. Yet, even while he joined in pioneering efforts to use some of the sophisticated statistical techniques entering sociology in the 1960s, he was always concerned with theory building and testing. And, indeed, unlike many other empirical researchers, he was not content to let a handful of specific empirical propositions pass as scientific theory. As he wrote in 1969, "Scientific theory does not consist of isolated propositions or inventories of them, though many presumably theoretical works in sociology are little more than inventories, but of a system of interrelated propositions in which a few more general principles subsume a larger number of less general ones" (1969:48). Influenced by the philosophy of science then current (Hempel, Nagel, and especially Braithwaite) he sought a greater level of generality along with precision of formulation, a deductive system and testability in theories constructed out of causal relationships. Indeed, formalization of theory building has been one of Blau's enduring interests.

Blau was also an avid student of classical social theory, from which

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he drew many of his most important ideas. His work on organizations is often identified with the Weberian problematic of bureaucracy,<sup>3</sup> but though central, that is not Blau's most distinctive theoretical ancestry. Blau was unusual from quite early in his work for taking Marx seriously – indeed, even for citing Marx in an era when American academic sociology generally ignored or dismissed his work;<sup>4</sup> nonetheless, Marx's influence was relatively peripheral. A more powerful influence was Simmel. Blau shared a debt to Simmel with those (like Lewis Coser and Max Gluckman) who brought attention to conflict forward within the functionalist paradigm, which normally focused on or presumed consensus. Blau drew from Simmel, however, less the idea that conflict might have social functions, than the notion of a formal sociology, one which would abstract form from content, structural pattern from historical specificity. And of course, he drew from Simmel a number of specific inspirations for his exchange theory.<sup>5</sup>

Blau's other great theoretical debt was more conventional. It was to Durkheim, particularly the Durkheim of *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893; and more generally the earlier, more structural and objectivistic Durkheim).<sup>6</sup> Blau devoted considerable effort to trying to demonstrate Durkheim's point that social consciousness which in one sense exists only within individual minds, nonetheless "exerts external constraints upon the acting and thinking of individuals" (Blau, 1960a: 78; Blau and Scott, 1962: 100-108). Along with his general orientation to sociological inquiry, shaped by the objectivism of *The Rules of Sociological Method* (Durkheim, 1895), Blau drew in important substantive ways from Durkheim.

One of the most consistent – perhaps the most consistent – substantive theme in Blau's work is the attempt to account for patterns of social differentiation (including both inequality and unranked heterogeneity) and their effects. In the central chapter of *Exchange and Power* which introduces the economic apparatus of indifference curves and the like (a chapter, incidentally, begun with a quote from Simmel on the necessity of hierarchy and the formal impossibility of perfect harmony within it) Blau explains his problem as that of identifying "general principles of social differentiation in groups" (1964: 169). Earlier, in *The Dynamics of Bureaucracy* (1955; see also 1954), Blau had examined how patterns of cooperation and competition differentiated persons and role structures in bureaucratic settings.<sup>7</sup> Status distributions were among the crucial sources of structural effects which Blau endeavored to demonstrate in a famous 1960 article. Blau and Duncan's *The American Occupational Structure* (1967) focused on a particular form of differentiation in social structure, and the title *Inequal-*

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*ity and Heterogeneity* (1977a) speaks for itself and for Blau's later work generally in this regard. In all these efforts, Blau not only took up issues of structural differentiation in one way or another, but also produced works which simultaneously launched new trajectories of empirical work and played central roles in the theoretical development of American sociology.

**The micro-macro debate**

Perhaps the single most important reversal in Blau's approach to theory building, as noted above, was his reconsideration of the desirability or even possibility of erecting macrosociology on the foundations of microsociology. This is not to say that at any point in his career Blau did not take care to distinguish among various levels of analysis. On the contrary, this was always part of his analytic strategy, but the nature of the distinction changed, with important implications for how macrosociological explanation was to be undertaken.

In his early work on organizations, Blau (1957: 65–72) distinguished among “structural,” organizational,” and “environmental” dimensions of analysis. The first refers to “the interrelations within a social system [of] the social relations between individuals or groups”; the second to the “interdependence of abstract elements in the organization, say, the relationships between personnel policies, supervisor practices, and interaction among workers”; and the third to “the analysis of the relationships between formal organizations and other institutions, for example, or the connections between the economic or political system and formal organizations.” These levels are viewed as distinct in the sense that each “higher” level contains new or “emergent” properties not present at the lower level; the levels are connected in the sense that relations operating at one level “constrain” and influence relations at the other levels.

Even in this early typology, Blau embraced the assumption which he would make central to his later structuralist thinking: that the micro-macro distinction refers to the “nature of the *population elements* on which social networks are defined” (Mayhew, 1980: 349). These elements might be individuals, organizations, or more encompassing social units. What Blau has generally meant by network (a term he was among the first sociologists to use) is different, however, from most modern network research (for example, Burt, 1982; see also contributions by Marsden and Burt in this volume). For most so-called network theorists, the network – that is to say, the social structure – is composed of relationships. It is a large scale aggregation of all the relationships formed among social actors. For Blau, however, the

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structure is not of relationships, but of positions. This becomes increasingly clear in his later work, but the germ of his approach is planted in even his most interpersonally focused studies. And, while interpersonal interactions remain central *data* by which Blau identifies positions, or judges the salience of particular parameters (dimensions of variation in a population)<sup>8</sup> for explaining social life, they are not conceived in and of themselves to constitute the units of social structure.

When Blau began his work in organizational sociology, nearly all attention in the field was focused on the quality of interpersonal relations in workplaces – for example, the so-called human relations school. Blau's work engaged this discourse, but also began to construct the ladder of increasing abstraction, holism, and comparative analysis that was soon to be climbed by himself and hordes of second generation students of organizations. Having been a graduate student at Columbia, Blau was quick to appropriate and apply the "contextual analysis" techniques developed by Lazarsfeld and colleagues (see Kendall and Lazarsfeld, 1950; Lazarsfeld and Menzel, 1961). These methods allowed investigators to examine the effects of aggregated individual and relational properties on individual behavior while taking into account the effects of the individual's own attributes on the property of interest. They were central to finding a way out of the fallacy (identified prominently in the sociological literature at about the same time; Robinson, 1950) of inferring correlations among individual attributes from ecological correlations. Indeed, it was a comment on Robinson's well-known article (Menzel, 1950) which largely stimulated Blau to write his classic article on "structural effects" (1960a).

This article marked only a step toward what he would later consider a fully structural analysis. The basic question it asked was ". . . whether the prevalence of social values in a community also exerts social constraints upon patterns of conduct that are independent of the influences exerted by the internalized orientations" (1960a: 78). It carried forward the Durkheimian theme that social facts are external to individuals, by arguing that "values and norms exert *external* constraints upon the acting and thinking of individuals" even if they only exist in the minds of individuals. But where Durkheim had increasingly found it necessary to take the processes of internalization of social facts seriously, Blau resolutely adhered to Durkheim's earlier (1895) strictures that social facts were external, enduring, and coercive. But, somewhat surprisingly in terms of his own later work (though not in terms of the hegemony of Parsonsian functionalism in 1960), the "structural" effects on which Blau focused were those of

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distributions of values and norms: “The structural effects of a social value can be isolated by showing that the association between its prevalence in a community or group and certain patterns of conduct is independent of whether an individual holds this value or not” (1960a: 79).

What Blau means by “external” thus turns out to be primarily the independence of the effects of distributional patterns from the effects of individual attitudes.<sup>9</sup> Thus, one might examine the effects on an individual’s behavior of being a member of a group whose average age is 50, while at the same time (but separately) taking into account the effects of a given individual’s age on his or her own behavior. Blau sought to show a variety of such structural effects in work groups and organizations more generally (Blau, 1960a; Blau and Scott, 1962: 100–108). And, in some part anticipating his exchange theory, Blau (1960a) also attempted to categorize the varying possible relations among individual and structural effects and to theorize the conditions under which these effects would be mutually supportive, antagonistic, contingent, etc.

In his early discussions of the relation between micro and macro level processes, Blau took the position that in order to explain the relation between variables at the macro level, it was necessary to shift down one or more levels to understand the sociopsychological processes underlying the observed relations. These processes were viewed as the intervening variables accounting for macro level connections. For example:

Statistical records brought about more impartial treatment of clients, for example, because they motivated interviewers to engage in supportive social interaction with colleagues which facilitated excluding all irrelevant personal considerations from their decisions in making placements. In sum, sociopsychological conditions in the organization lead to given processes of social interaction, and these processes must be examined to account for the relationships between conditions in the organization and the results they accomplish (1957: 71).<sup>10</sup>

In *Exchange and Power* (1964), Blau placed more emphasis on the emergent properties of macrostructures. At this point, he defined macrostructures as complex structures, the elements of which were also social structures: “We may call these structures of interrelated groups ‘macrostructures’ and those composed of interacting individuals ‘microstructures’ (1964: 24).

Microsociology, so far as Blau was concerned, was still sociology. Though it looked at concrete individuals, it focused on them neither in terms of their idiosyncrasies nor of psychological principles but in terms of the social factors which determined their behavior. In his

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1986 introduction to a new edition of *Exchange and Power*, Blau made this point clear, contrasting his own exchange theory to that of Homans' (1961):

The objective of exchange theory is, in my view, to explain social life in terms of exchange principles by analyzing the reciprocal processes composing exchange, not to explain why individuals participate in certain exchange relations in terms of the motives and the underlying psychological principles . . . In sociology, not only the *explicandum* – what we try to explain – but also the *explicans* – in what terms we explain it – is social (1986: ix).

In contrast to Homans, in other words, Blau was prepared to declare himself strongly Durkheimian.<sup>11</sup> As much in 1964 as in 1986, Blau was committed to the notion that social phenomena were sharply distinguished from individual phenomena by their emergent properties which he defined as “essentially relationships between elements in a structure” (1964: 3). Somewhat surprisingly, though, given Blau’s declared theoretical strategy of developing a “formal” analysis from micro through to macrosociology, *Exchange and Power* relies rather heavily on “values” in its macrosociological sections. Rethinking this feature of his exchange theory may have been one of the most central stimuli for Blau to begin to develop his new, purely structural approach in the later 1960s and 1970s.

A noteworthy difference from some later sociological approaches to the relationship of micro to macro level phenomena is that Blau is prepared to cede the individual as such to psychology (or other non-sociological accounts). He does not offer any claim that individuality itself is a social process, defined by ideology (cf. Dumont, 1966, 1984) or by the intersubjective constitution of individuals (cf. Dallmayr, 1973; Taylor, 1985). The objects of sociology are to be the structures (and presumably, though not explicitly, the processes) of interaction, and the structures of relationships among groups. The formation of groups is a result of the interaction of individuals, so that the macrosociological analysis of relationships among groups must depend on the microsociological analysis of their creation from structured interaction.<sup>12</sup> This claim is abandoned in Blau’s later, more purely structural, work. Its abandonment (explicit rejection) is based on a changing definition of macrostructure. As we noted earlier, in Blau’s later work macrostructure is defined in terms of the distribution of social positions along various parameters of differentiation. The salience of parameters may be tested by patterns of interaction. The notion that ingroup relations are more prevalent than outgroup and that ingroup pressures sustain their prevalence are *assumptions*. The new theory does not attempt to explain what produces these ingroup pres-



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asures. The processes which tend to promote cohesion among members of a particular group cease in this later conception to have direct macrosociological significance for Blau, though he posits a desirable complementarity between macrosociological theory and microsociological theories like exchange theory, which do try to explain ingroup processes.<sup>13</sup> In fact, Blau has recently been at pains to point out the disjuncture between the processes which explain ingroup solidarity and those which explain macrosocial (or societal) integration:

Whatever benefits ingroup bonds may have for individuals, from the macrosociological perspective they are a disintegrative force because, far from integrating the diverse segments of a society or community, they fragment it into exclusive groupings. The social integration of the various segments of a large population depends not on strong ingroup ties but on extensive intergroup relations that strengthen the connections among segments and unite them in a distinctive community, notwithstanding their diversity. Value consensus is not sufficient for the social integration of an entire society or large community, and neither is functional interdependence (Blau and Schwartz, 1984: 12).<sup>14</sup>

If in his 1964 formulation, Blau's emphasis was on substructures forming the units of larger structures, by 1974 and especially 1977, the units of larger structures were no longer seen as substructures but essentially as categories (parameters) and positions. In *Exchange and Power*, Blau placed a considerable emphasis on the "interplay between the internal forces within substructures and the forces that connect the diverse substructures, some of which may be microstructures composed of individuals, while others may themselves be macrostructures composed of subgroups" (1964: 25). He saw this very interplay as a key emergent property of macrostructures. Even more strikingly, Blau rested most of his macrosociological account of mediating links among individuals and groups on a loosely Parsonsian understanding of value consensus (1964: 253–311). Common standards of valuation enabled the use of media (like money) "to transcend personal transactions and develop complex networks of indirect exchange" (1964: 24). In terms of Blau's later theory, the macrosociology of *Exchange and Power* is not strictly structural, despite his use of structural language to depict it.

Nonetheless, Blau's exchange theory is distinctively more structural and more concerned with macrosociological phenomena than Homans'. Collins, for example, described Blau as "leap-frogging" Homans by developing "a full-fledged nonreductionistic exchange theory" (1979: 323). Eisenstadt (1965: 334) similarly recognized "Blau's . . . very important advance in the application of exchange analysis to social structure and behavior because it attempts to con-

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front interpersonal exchange, on the one hand, and structural organization and institutionalization, on the other, and not simply to derive or extrapolate one from the other." Eisenstadt wished, however, that Blau had moved further in analyzing the differences between interpersonal exchange and institutional behavior. Bierstedt, while finding *Exchange and Power* "brilliant," faulted it for developing an analysis of calculating behavior which was most apposite "to a wholly uninstitutionalized society in which all social relations are conducted *ab initio* and without established norms. But the institutionalization of roles into statuses, of power into authority, and of precedent into norm reduces the role of calculated exchange and introduces instead accommodations to the structure as it exists" (1965: 790).<sup>15</sup> This seems only a partially accurate criticism, however, both because Blau did address institutionalization and the role of norms (though tending to treat the latter as though they were more or less universal, as in the norm of reciprocity) and because the error may lie less in some hypothesized movement from uninstitutionalized to institutionalized than in failure to satisfactorily address variation in the nature of institutions.

A more sustained critique of Blau's individualism is made by Ekeh (1974: Ch. 7). Ekeh recognizes that Blau attempts to "compromise between collectivistic and individualistic orientations in sociology" (1974: 167) but argues that Blau's emphasis on economic self-interest as the motive force for social action actually makes him more individualistic (though not psychological) than Homans. In his exchange theory, Blau takes up something very close to the postulate of self-interested individual rationality, which is characteristic not only of economic theory but of early sociologists such as Spencer and Frazer (if the latter can be generically termed a sociologist). This is a sharp departure from Blau's usual adherence to the Durkheim of *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895) and *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893). Durkheim attacked Spencer precisely for his assumption of self-interested individual rationality as the basic motivation in social life. Ekeh distinguishes between Durkheim's accounts of the origins of social institutions, and of their functioning. Blau can be considered Durkheimian, he argues, only in the second sense:

When the issue of concern in sociological theory is the origin or development of institutions, Blau is as far apart from Durkheim or Levi-Strauss as any individualistic sociologist – be he Spencer or Homans. For Durkheim, social institutions, norms, and values grow out of the moral mandates of society. For Spencer, Frazer, Homans, and Blau, the origin of social institutions and of societal norms and values is to be traced to either the psychological needs or the economic motives of individuals in society. At this level of the origins