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## NATIONALISM

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Social theory has approached nationalism most as a political ideology structuring relations of power and conflict. It has focused on nationalism's relationship to ethnic violence and war, on the production of beliefs that one's own country is the best, and on the invocation of national unity to override internal differences. It has seen nationalism first through bellicose international relations and second through projects by which elites attempt to mobilize mass support. This has been an influential view both among scholars of nationalism (such as Michael Hechter) and among general social theorists (such as Jürgen Habermas) who have tended to see nationalism largely as a problem to be overcome.

A second strain of social theory, associated with modernization theory and anticipated by both Weber and Durkheim, has seen nation building as a crucial component of developing an effective modern society, one capable of political stability and economic development. Nationalism, as the ideology associated with such nation building, is thus important to a phase on the process of becoming modern and also a normal reflection of industrialization and state formation. Ernst Gellner, Charles Tilly, and Michael Mann are key representatives. But however normal to a developmental phase nationalism may be, all see it as also deeply implicated in power relations and conflicts and prone to problematic manipulation by state elites.

These first two lines of theory both emphasize politics and the state and treat nationalism mainly as a feature of the modern era. A third strain of social theory recognizes the role of nationalism in politics and conflict but stresses also its more positive contributions to the production of culture, the preservation of historical memory, and the formation of group solidarity. Many of the most influential theorists in this group also place much greater stress on the sources of

nationalism in ancient ethnicities that provide the basis for identities prior to any specific political mobilization. Anthony Smith is the foremost representative of this view. A related point is that nationalism ought not to be approached only through its most extreme manifestations, but also grasped in its more banal forms—in a variety of ceremonial events, for example, and the organization of athletic competitions. These contribute not only to specific group loyalties but to the reproduction of the general view that the world is organized in terms of nations and national identities.

Here the study of nationalism as a topic of social theory intersects with the more reflexive question of how nationalism has shaped a crucial unit of analysis in social theory, that of society. While “sociality” may be universal to human life, the idea of discrete, bounded, and integrally unitary “societies” is more historically specific. It appears in strong form as one of the characteristic, even definitive, features of the modern era.

This reflects political features—as, for example, both state control over borders and intensification of state administration internally help to produce the idea of bounded and unified societies, and as arguments for political legitimacy increasingly claim ascent from the people rather than descent from God or inherited office. It also reflects cultural features, although many of these are not ancient inheritances but modern inventions or reforms, such as linguistic standardization, common educational systems, museums as vehicles of representation, and the introduction of national media. In one of the most influential recent studies of nationalism, Benedict Anderson (1991) has described it as productive of “imagined communities.” By this he means that nations are produced centrally by cultural practices that encourage members to situate their own identities and self-understandings within a nation. Reading the same news, for example, not only provides people with common information, and common

images of “us” and “them” but helps to reproduce a collective narrative in which the manifold different events and activities reported fit together like narrative threads in a novel and interweaves them all with the life of the reader. Practices and institutions of state administration are central to this production of nations as categories of understanding—imagining—but they are not exhaustive of it, and those who wield state power do not entirely control it.

To simplify the field, then, we can see four main themes in theories of nationalism (which may be combined in different ways by different authors): (1) nationalism as a source or form of conflict, (2) nationalism as a source of political integration, (3) nationalism as a reform and appropriation of ethnic inheritance, (4) nationalism as a new cultural creation. These themes are deployed in debates over “civic” versus “ethnic” nationalism and over the “modernity” or “primordiality” of nations. But before we turn to debates within the field, we should consider further the underlying problem of nationalism as a source and a shaper of the notion of society itself.

### NATIONALISM AND THE PRODUCTION OF “SOCIETIES”

Human beings have always lived in groups. The nature of these groups has, however, varied considerably. They range from families and small bands through clans and other larger kin organizations to villages, kingdoms, and empires; they include religions and cultures, occupational groups and castes, nations, and more recently, even global society to the extent that it knits all humanity into a single group. In most of these cases, the self-understanding of members is crucial to the existence of the group—a kingdom, a religion, or a caste is both an “objective” collection of people and pattern of social organization and a “subjective” way in which people understand how they belong together and should interact. This is clearly true of the idea of nation. Without the subjective component of self-understanding, nations could not exist. Moreover, once the idea of nation exists, it can be used to organize not just self-understanding but categorizations of others.

The most basic meaning of nationalism is the use of this way of categorizing human populations, both as a way of looking at the world as a whole and as a way of establishing group identity from within. In addition, nationalism usually refers not just to using the category of nation to conceptualize social groups but also to holding that national identities and groups are of basic importance (and often that loyalty to one’s own nation should be a commanding value). Nationalism is thus simultaneously a way of constructing groups and a normative claim. The two sides come together in ideas about who properly belongs together in a society and in arguments that members have moral obligations to the nation as a whole—perhaps even to kill on its behalf or die for it in a war.

Nationalism, then, is the use of the category “nation” to organize perceptions of basic human identities, grouping people together with fellow nationals and distinguishing them from members of other nations. It is influential as a way of helping to produce solidarity within national categories, as a way of determining how specific groups should be treated (for example, in terms of voting rights or visas and passports), and as a way of seeing the world as a whole. We see this representation in the different-colored territories on globes and maps, and in the organization of the United Nations. At the same time, clearly the boundaries of nations are both less fixed and more permeable than nationalists commonly recognize.

Central to nationalist discourse is the idea that there should be a match between a nation and a sovereign state; indeed, the nation (usually understood as prepolitical and always already there in historical terms) constitutes the ground of the legitimacy of the state. Kedourie (1993) has argued, for example, that nationalism was invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In his view, it “pretends to supply a criterion for the determination of the unit of population proper to enjoy a government exclusively its own, for the legitimate exercise of power in the state, and for the right organization of a society of states” (p. 1). The core elements of the doctrine are simple: Humanity is naturally divided into nations; nations are known by certain empirically identifiable characteristics; and the only legitimate type of government is national self-government.

Gellner (1983) likewise avers that nationalism is “a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent” (p. 5). Yet nationalism is not merely a “political principle.” It depends also on reproduction through banal practices such as Olympic competitions (Billig 1995) and imaginative construction, for example, in museums, censuses, and habits of reading (Anderson 1991). And, of course, whether or not ethnicity explains nationalism, it facilitates national integration and identification.

A variety of claims are made about what constitutes “proper” nations. For example, they are held ideally to have common and distinct territories, common and distinct national cultures (including especially languages), and sovereign states of their own. It is very difficult to define nations in terms of these claims, however, since there are exceptions to almost all of them. To take language as an example, there are both nations whose members speak multiple languages (Switzerland), and languages spoken by members of different nations (English). Likewise, nationalist ideologies may hold that all members share distinctive common descent, constituting in effect a large kin group, but this is not definitive of nations in general. Nations are organized at a scale and with an internal diversity of membership that transcends kinship. No definition

of *nation* (or of its correlative terms such as *nationalism* and *nationality*) has ever gained general acceptance.

In this sense, nationalism is a “discursive formation.” It is a way of speaking that shapes our consciousness but also is problematic enough that it keeps generating more issues and questions. As a discursive formation, nationalism is implicated in the widespread if problematic treatment of societies as bounded, integral, wholes with distinctive identities, cultures, and institutions. Charles Tilly, Rogers Brubaker, and most important, Pierre Bourdieu have all called for a relational approach, by contrast to ideas about clear collective identities. Their critiques have hardly ended the problematic usage, partly because it is so deeply embedded in the way we speak and think. This is not an unmotivated error by social scientists; it is a participation, perhaps unwitting, in the nationalist rhetoric that pervades public life and contemporary culture.

### ETHNIC AND CIVIC NATIONALISM

The category of nation has ancient roots. Both the term and two of its distinctive modern meanings were in play in the Roman Empire. For the Romans, the term referred to descent groups (usually understood to have common language and culture as well). But the Romans commonly used such ethnic categorizations to designate those who were not Roman citizens. National origins, in this sense, were what differentiated those conquered by or at war with Romans from those fully incorporated into the Roman state, not what Romans claimed as the source of their own unity. But in the very distinction, we see two sides of the discourse of nations ever since: first, an attribution of common ethnicity (culture and/or biological descent) and an idea of common membership of a state (citizenship, and more generally respect for laws and standards of behavior, which can be adopted, not only inherited).

These two sides to the idea of nation shape an enduring debate over the extent to which a legitimate people should or must be ethnically defined, or can or should be civically constituted and what the implications of each might be. Ethnic nationalist claims, based on race, kinship, language, or common culture, have been widespread throughout the modern era. They sometimes extend beyond the construction of identity to the reproduction of enmity, demands that members place the nation ahead of other loyalties, and attempts to purge territories of those defined as foreign. As a result, ethnic nationalism is often associated with ethnic violence and projects of ethnic cleansing or genocide. However, ethnic solidarity is also seen by many as basic to national identity as such and thus to the notion of the nation-state. While this notion is as much contested as defended, it remains influential.

In such usage, ethnic nationalism is commonly opposed to civic nationalism. The latter is understood as the loyalty

of individual citizens to a state based purely on political identity. Habermas (1998) has theorized this as “constitutional patriotism,” stressing the extent to which political loyalty is to a set of institutional arrangements rather than a prepolitical culture or other extrapolitical solidarity. Ethnic nationalism, in such usage, refers precisely to rooting political identity and obligation in the existence of a prepolitical collective unit—the nation—which achieves political subjectivity by virtue of the state. The legitimacy of the state, in turn, is judged by reference to the interests of the nation.

The contrast of ethnic to civic nationalism is heavily influenced by that of Germany to France. The contrast has been enduring and has resulted in different understandings of citizenship. France has been much more willing, for example, to use legal mechanisms to grant immigrants French citizenship, while Germany—equally open to immigration in numerical terms—has generally refused its immigrants German citizenship unless they are already ethnic Germans (Brubaker 1992). Other countries vary on the same dimension (and in Europe, the European Union is developing a mainly civic, assimilationist legal framework), but it is important to recognize that the difference is one of proportion and ideological emphasis. As Smith (1986) has remarked that all nations are shaped by both territorial and ethnic approaches to identity, and all represent an uneasy confluence of “civic” and “genealogical” or ethnic models of sociocultural organization. Not all scholars accept the distinction or hold it to be sharp; those who do use it often attribute ethnic nationalism to countries that are “late modernizers” (see p. 149).

Central to the idea of civic nationalism is the possibility for citizens to adopt national identity by choice. This is most commonly discussed in terms of the assimilation of individual immigrants into nation-states; civic nations can in principle be open to anyone who agrees to follow their laws. Citizenship in the state is seen as primary rather than prior membership in a descent group or cultural tradition. The distinction is fuzzy, however, as a rhetoric of civic nationalism and citizenship can mask underlying commitments to particularistic cultural or racial definitions of what counts as a “proper” or good citizen. Thus (in a recently prominent example) even law-abiding Muslims may not seem sufficiently French to many, and conversely the French state may pass laws ostensibly enforcing neutrality on religion but in fact expressing particular ethnocultural mores. It is particularly difficult to frame rationales for limits on immigration in civic nationalist terms without falling back on ethnic nationalism.

At the same time, the civic nationalist tradition contains another thread. This is the notion that the nation itself is made, is a product of collective action. This is symbolized by revolutions and the founding of new states (which may include more or less successful efforts to call forth national solidarities). The idea of choice here is not simply that of

individual membership but of collective determination of the form and content of the nation itself—the effort to take control of culture as a historical project rather than merely receiving it as inheritance. When the revolutionary French National Assembly reformed the calendar and systems of measurement, thus, it was engaged not merely in administration of the state but in an effort to make a certain sort of nation—one with a more modern, rational culture. And, of course, the tension between attempting to make a new culture and preserve the old has been played out in the educational system ever since.

While much nationalist ideology has claimed definitive ethnic roots, social scientists are divided on the question, and most prominent twentieth-century analysts of nationalism have sought to challenge the explanation of nationalism by ethnicity. Kohn (1944) stresses the crucial role of modern politics, especially the idea of sovereignty. Hobsbawm (1990) treats nationalism as a kind of second-order political movement based on a false consciousness that ethnicity helps to produce but cannot explain because the deeper roots lie in political economy, not culture. The dominant approach in contemporary scholarship approaches nationalism largely as an ideological reflection of state formation (Mann 1993; Tilly 1990). Gellner (1983) emphasizes industrialization and also stresses the number of cases of failed or absent nationalisms: ethnic groups which mounted either little or no attempt to become nations in the modern sense. This suggests that even if ethnicity plays a role, it cannot be a sufficient explanation (although one imagines the nineteenth-century German romantics would simply reply that there are strong, historic nations and weak ones destined to fade from the historic stage). Hayes (1931) argues for seeing nationalism as a sort of religion. Hechter (2000) analyzes it in terms of strategic individual action aimed at maximizing mostly economic and political benefits. Kedourie (1993) approaches nationalism as an ideology and attempts to debunk nationalism by showing the untenability of the German romantic cultural-ethnic claims. Indeed, in their different ways, all these thinkers have sought to debunk the common claims nationalists themselves make to long-established ethnic identities.

Against this backdrop, Smith (1986) acknowledges that nations cannot be seen as primordial or natural but nonetheless argues that they are rooted in relatively ancient histories. Smith argues that the origins of modern nationalism lie in the successful bureaucratization of aristocratic ethnic (ethnic community), which were able to transform themselves into genuine nations only in the West. In the West, territorial centralization and consolidation went hand in hand with a growing cultural standardization. Nations, Smith thus suggests, are long-term processes, continually reenacted and reconstructed; they require ethnic cores, homelands, heroes and golden ages if they are to survive. “Modern nations and nationalism have only extended and

deepened the meanings and scope of older ethnic concepts and structures” (p. 216). Nationalism brings some degree of universalization, but even modern “civic” nations do not fully transcend ethnicity or ethnic sentiments. Consider the fact that France is the primary example of civic nationalism, and yet imagine France without French culture: language, cheeses, styles of social theory, and all.

The ethnic similarities and bonds that contribute to the formation of nations may indeed be important and long standing, but in themselves they do not fully constitute either particular nations or the modern idea of nation. While some critics of ethnic explanations of nationalism emphasize the influence of state formation or other “master variables,” a number assert that nations are created by nationalism—by this particular form of discourse, political rhetoric, or ideology—not merely passively present and awaiting the contingent address of nationalists (Anderson 1991; Chatterjee 1986; Gellner 1983; Kedourie 1993).

An emphasis on preexisting ethnicity—even where this is rightly identified—is unable to shed much light on why so many modern movements, policies, ideologies, and conflicts are constituted within the discourse of nationalism. Indeed, as Gellner (1983:8–18, 61) has suggested, the very self-recognition of ethnicities or cultures as defining identities is distinctively modern. Walker Connor (1994) uses a similar point to distinguish ethnic groups as “potential nations” from real nations: “While an ethnic group may, therefore, be other-defined, the nation must be self-defined” (p. 103).

Explanations of nationalism, thus, need to address the contemporary conditions that make it effective in people’s lives, their attempts to orient themselves in the world, and their actions. Such conditions are, of course, subject to change, and nationalist constructions are apt to change with them. Thus, Indian nationalists from the nineteenth century through Nehru were able to make a meaningful (although hardly seamless or uncontested) unity of the welter of sub-continental identities as part of their struggle against the British. The departure of the British from India changed the meaning of Congress nationalism, however, as this became the program of an Indian state, not of those outside official politics who resisted an alien regime. Among other effects of this, a rhetorical space was opened up for “communal” and other sectional claims that were less readily brought forward in the colonial period (Chatterjee 1994). Similarly, the proliferation of nationalisms in Eastern Europe attendant on the collapse of communist rule involved a “reframing” of older national identities and nationalist projects; the nationalisms of the 1990s were neither altogether new nor simply resumptions of those that predated communism (Brubaker 1996). The opposition between primordality and “mere invention” leaves open a very wide range of historicities within which national and other traditions can exert real force. As Renan ([1871]1990) famously stressed,

nationalist histories are matters of forgetting as well as remembering, including forgotten the “deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations” (p. 11).

Nationalism is partly a matter of narrative construction, the production (and reproduction and revision) of narratives locating the nation’s place in history. As Anderson (1991) puts it, nations move through historical time as persons move through biographical time; each may figure in stories like characters in a novel. This is one reason why the continuity of ethnic identities alone does not adequately explain nationalism: The narrative constructions in which it is cast change and potentially transform the meaning of whatever ethnic commonalities may exist. Ironically, the writing of linear historical narratives of national development and claims to primordial national identity often proceed hand in hand. Indeed, the writing of national historical narratives is so embedded in the discourse of nationalism that it almost always depends rhetorically on the presumption of some kind of preexisting national identity in order to give the story a beginning. A claim to primordial national identity is, in fact, a version of nationalist historical narrative.

### MODERNITY VERSUS PRIMORDIALITY

A long-running debate in the literature on nationalism pits arguments that it is an extension of ancient ethnicity (Smith 1986) against those who argue that it is essentially modern (Gellner 1983; Greenfeld 1992; Hobsbawm 1990). Majority scholarly opinion tends toward the latter view, although explanations differ. “Modernists” variously see nationalism rooted in industrialization (Gellner 1983), state formation (Mann 1993; Tilly 1990), the rise of new communications media and genres of collective imagination (Anderson 1991; Deutsch 1966), and the development of new rhetorics for collective identity and capacities for collective action (Calhoun 1997). While many favor specific factors as primary explanations, most recognize that several causes are interrelated.

Many nationalists but few scholars see nationalism as ubiquitous in history and simply the “normal” way of organizing large-scale collective identity. Most social scientists point, rather, to the variety of political and cultural forms common before the modern era—empires and great religions, for example—and the transformations wrought by the rise of a new kind of intensive state administration, cultural integration, popular political participation, and international relations. Many of these social scientists argue that nations and nationalism in their modern sense are both new. In particular, they would argue that ethnicity as a way of organizing collective identity underwent at the least a substantial reorganization when it began to be deployed as part of ethnonationalist rhetoric in the modern era. Others, however, including notably Anthony Smith and John Armstrong,

argue that there is more continuity in the ethnic core of nations, although they too would agree that modernity transformed—if it did not outright create—nationalism.

The attraction of a claimed ethnic foundation to nations lies largely in the implication that nationhood is in some sense primordial and natural. Nationalists typically claim that their nations are simply given and immutable rather than constructions of recent historical action or tendentious contemporary claims. Much early scholarly writing on nations and nationalism shared in this view and sought to discover which were the “true” ethnic foundations of nationhood. It is no doubt ideologically effective to claim that a nation has existed since time immemorial or that its traditions have been passed down intact from heroic founders. In no case, however, does historical or social science research support such a claim. All nations are historically created.

Noting this, one line of research emphasizes the manipulation of popular sentiments by the more or less cynical production of national culture by intellectuals and state-building elites. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), for example, have collected numerous examples of the ways in which apparently definitive cultural markers of national identity can in fact be traced to specific acts of creation embedded in political (or sometimes marketing) projects rather than reflecting preexisting ethnicity. The Scots tartan kilt is a famous example, dating not from the mists of primordial Highland history but from eighteenth-century resistance to Anglicization (Trevor-Roper 1983) and early nineteenth-century romantic celebrations of a no-longer-troubling ethnic Scottishness. Likewise, nineteenth-century Serbian and Croatian intellectuals strove to divide their common Serbo-Croatian language into two distinct vernaculars with separate literary traditions. But as this example makes clear, it is not obvious that because the “traditions” of nationalism are “invented,” they are somehow less real or valid. Anderson (1996) finds the same fault with Gellner: “Gellner is so anxious to show that nationalism masquerades under false pretences that he assimilates ‘invention’ to ‘fabrication’ and ‘falsity,’ rather than to ‘imagining’ and ‘creation’” (p. 6).

Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) imply that long-standing, “primordial” tradition would somehow count as legitimate, while by contrast various nationalist traditions are of recent and perhaps manipulative creation. Many ideologues do claim origins at the dawn of history, but few scholars have doubted that cultural traditions are constantly renewed. What so-called primordialists have argued is that certain identities and traditions—especially those of ethnicity—are experienced as primordial. Sociologically, thus, what matters is less the antiquity of the contents of tradition than the efficacy of the process by which certain beliefs and understandings are constituted as unquestioned, immediate knowledge. This has more to do with current bases for the reproduction of culture than with history as such. Ethnicity

or cultural traditions are bases for nationalism because they effectively constitute historical memory, because they inculcate it as “prejudice,” not because the historical origins they claim are accurate (prejudice means not just prior to judgment, but constituting the condition of judgment.). Moreover, all traditions are “invented” (or at least in a more diffuse sense, created); none are truly primordial. This was acknowledged, although rather weakly, even by some of the functionalists who emphasized the notion of primordality and the “givenness” of cultural identities and traditions (see especially Geertz 1963). All such traditions also are potentially contested and subject to continual reshaping, whether explicit or hidden. Some claims about nationality may fail to persuade because they are too manifestly manipulated by creators or because the myth being proffered does not speak to the circumstances and practical commitments of the people in question.

Notions of nations as acting subjects are distinctively modern, part of a new way of constructing collective identity. This said, there is no scholarly agreement about when nationalism began. Greenfeld (1992) dates it from the English Civil War, Anderson (1991) from Latin American independence movements, Alter (1989) from the French Revolution, and Breuilly (1993) and Kedourie (1993) both from German romanticism and reaction to the French Revolution. Calhoun (1997) suggests that rather than trying to identify a single point of origin, scholars should see nationalism as drawing together several different threads of historical change. As a discursive formation, it took on increasingly clear form through the early modern period and was fully in play by the Napoleonic era.

## CONCLUSION

The idea of nation became a more fundamental building block of social life during the early modern period, especially the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While it is fruitless to search for a precise origin point for modern nationalism, it is possible to identify some of the social changes and conditions that helped to make it important.

First, nationalism reflected a growing scale of social organization, larger than cities (which had previously been primary units of belonging and common culture for elites), villages, or kin groups. This was made possible partly by improved communication that enabled larger populations to interact with greater density—a matter simultaneously of roads, the spread of literacy, and wars that brought large populations together in common military organization and movements (Deutsch 1966). It was also facilitated by increased integration of trade among different regions within contiguous territories and by the mobilization of new kinds of military and state power.

Second, nationalism constituted a new ideology about primary identities. In this it competed not only with localism

and family but with religion (Anderson 1991; Hayes 1931). In fact, nationalism was often furthered by religious movements and wars—notably in the wake of the reformation—and national self-understandings were frequently religiously inflected (as in the Catholicism of Poland or the Protestantism of England). But nationalism involved a kind of secular faith and a primary loyalty to the nation that was and is distinct from any religion that may intertwine with it.

Third, nationalism grew hand in hand with modern states and was basic to a new way of claiming political legitimacy. States furthered social integration among their subjects by building roads, mobilizing militaries, sponsoring education, and standardizing languages (Breuilly 1993). But they also were shaped by a cultural change that introduced a new, stronger idea of “the people” who were both governed by and served by a state. Indeed, the idea of the state as providing necessary services for the “commonwealth” was basic, and with it came the notion that the legitimacy of the state depended on its serving its people effectively, being recognized by them, or both. This placed a new stress on the question of who the people might be. The notions that they were those who happened to have been born into the domain of a monarch or who conquered in war were clearly inadequate. The idea of nation came to the forefront. It represented the “people” of a country as an internally unified group with common interests and the capacity to act.

The last point is crucial. The idea of nation not only laid claim to history or common identity. It purported to describe (or construct) a collective actor: “we the people,” as articulated in the U.S. Constitution or the French people who collectively stormed the Bastille and joined in the *levée en masse*.

The constitution of nations—not only in dramatic revolutionary acts of founding but in the formation of common culture and political identities—is one of the pivotal features of the modern era. It is part of the organization of political participation and loyalty, of culture and identity, of the way history is taught and the way wars are fought. It not only shapes practical political identity and ideology, it also shapes the very idea of society in which much social theory is rooted.

— Craig Calhoun

*See also* Citizenship; Collective Memory; Historical and Comparative Theory; State; Tilly, Charles

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## NEGOTIATED ORDER

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Negotiated order is a theoretical perspective developed primarily by Anselm Strauss (1917–1996), who argued that virtually all social order is negotiated order. To accomplish tasks in social settings, people chiefly negotiate with each other. Through ongoing processes of negotiation, social actors alternately create, maintain, transform, and are constrained by, social structures. The negotiated-order perspective provides a means to understand the processes involved in both structural change and stability and to identify the social structures and conditions that shape those processes. It also permits researchers to address one of the central concerns in sociology—the link between individuals and society—by specifying how social actors respond to and changed social structure, whether they act on their own behalf or as organizational representatives.

The negotiated-order perspective enables researchers to examine patterned negotiations between social actors embedded in organizations and between organizations, occupations, professions, industries, markets, social worlds, or nations. Negotiations occur whenever acting units encounter ambiguity or uncertainty, when they define organizational routines differently, when they differ in their approach to problems, or when they create exceptions or loopholes for previously established rules and policies. When social actors settle on new practices, those patterns become part of the stable structure or “organizational background” that guides future negotiations. The perspective thus encourages researchers to incorporate historical data in their analyses by investigating how structural conditions arose in the past and observing how those conditions influence present negotiations.

Strauss (1978) offered this description of negotiated order at the organizational level:

The negotiated order on any given day could be conceived of as the sum total of the organization's rules and policies, along with whatever agreements, understandings, pacts, contracts, and other working arrangements currently [operate]. These include agreements at every level of the organization, of every clique and coalition, and include covert as well as overt agreements. (pp. 5–6)

With roots in the symbolic interactionist tradition, Strauss and his colleagues conceived of negotiated order as a critical response to structural-functionalist characterizations of social structure as immutable and as exerting a one-way influence on social behavior. They wanted to document and analyze social change by placing negotiation in the forefront without sacrificing respect for social structure.