

# Introduction: Peter Blau's sociological structuralism

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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 It has not been replaced by any new hegemonic approach to sociological inquiry, but forced to share the stage with a wide range of competing perspectives.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

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

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 Braithewaite) 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

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-*

*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

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; Robnson, 1950) of inferring correlations among individual attributes from ecological correlations. Indeed, it was a comment on Robnson'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

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

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-

tures. 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-

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 psychologistic) 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

or development of institutions and societal norms, beliefs and values, Blau – if we are to judge by his social exchange theory – is anti-Durkheimian and eminently individualistic (1974: 184–5).

Though Ekeh recognizes that Blau (unlike Homans) works with a notion of “higher level” social phenomena as emergent, he does not give much attention to the structural side of Blau’s argument. As a result he somewhat overstates his case. This is significant, for example, insofar as it is largely structural factors which allow Blau to derive his account of power from his analysis of exchange, rather than arguing like Homans that exchange relations give individuals the occasion to display or validate power (which is assumed generally to be already acquired before the beginning of the exchange; see Homans, 1967a: 54–5).

In his 1986 introduction to the paperback edition of *Exchange and Power* Blau relegates exchange theory to explaining “the reciprocal incentives that sustain social relations, whereas macrostructural theory explains the external constraints the population structure imposes on social relations” (1986: xiv). This notion of the constraining role of the population structure, though hinted at as early as the essay on structural effects (1960a), was not freed from a Parsonsian concern with values until the very late 1960s and 1970s. A 1969 essay on “The Objectives of Sociology” shows Blau making a distinction among processes of social association, formal status structures, and social values, and conceiving of each of the three as a type of social form. His return to Simmel’s notion of a formal sociology was key to Blau’s reconceptualization of macrosociology. In this essay, he distinguished “formal structures of social relations and associations” from “the substantive content of the social values that influence them” and argued that sociologists should be concerned with values primarily, or even only, insofar as they can be placed in relation to structural forms. Values, and culture more generally, appear in Blau’s more recent theory as content, and thus play little or no direct role in constituting the formal theory or explaining structural aspects of social integration.<sup>16</sup> This is one reason why in his later work Blau understands the role of social structures essentially in terms of constraint on people’s action.

Blau’s current macrostructural theory is heavily focused on the impact of absolute and especially relative size and number. This is a concern derived not only from Simmel, but also from Blau’s empirical research on complex organizations. In a middle phase of his work, Blau (1970) undertook to develop a deductive theory of organizational structure which in many ways was the direct precursor to his later macrosocial structural theory.<sup>17</sup> A central claim of both theory and empirical research was that organizational size affects extent of bu-

reaucratization, but only as mediated through its effect on complexity. Size increases structural complexity, which tends to increase administrative overhead as a means of providing coordination among diverse units. But increased organizational size is also associated with increased size of the average subunit, resulting in intraunit homogeneity, a condition associated with reduced coordination requirements that result in administrative economies. Distinguishing these potentially contradictory effects of size enabled Blau to account for the sometimes indeterminate and conflicting associations observed between size and bureaucratization. Blau's research in this area helped to spark an enormous literature.<sup>18</sup> What is of relevance here, however, is less the substantive finding than the theoretical approach. We see not only Blau's interest in deductive theorizing, but a fairly precise analog to the micro-macro distinction he would invoke in his studies of social structure more generally.

Size is clearly a population attribute which cannot be reduced to any individual attribute. Other macrosociological concepts treat phenomena which are simply too complex to be considered by aggregation rather than abstraction:

Tracing the multitude of interpersonal relations of millions of people would not only be impossible, even with a large computer, but even if possible it would be utterly meaningless, because we could not make sense of the tremendous complexity of the results. Moreover, the minutiae of the daily social life in every family and friendship clique are not relevant for understanding the structure of entire societies (1986: xv).

Macrosocial structure, then, is not profitably understood according to Blau as the sum total of all social relations. Such a view seems implicit in much of the network approach to social structure. Blau, however, argues for the necessity of a greater level of analytic abstraction. To some extent, Blau seems to regard this as merely a pragmatic need, the necessity "to paint a large canvas in bold strokes" (*ibid.*), rather than an essential difference in the sorts of phenomena considered by micro and macrosociology. At other points, however, he appears to suggest a fundamental difference in kind, comparable to that he would introduce between individual and social phenomena. Microsocial phenomena then are seen as involving concrete interpersonal relations – always conceived of as at least implicitly sociopsychological rather than purely structural – rather than the abstract relations among positions which are the stuff of macrosociology.

Ironically, Blau has become comfortable with an exclusively macrostructural sociology just at the time when many other social theorists are engaged in efforts to find the "missing link" between microsociol-

ogy and macrosociology (cf. Alexander, *et al.*, eds., 1987; Collins, 1981, 1986; Coleman, 1986, 1987). There is a good deal of debate about whether these terms refer to real differences in subject matter, deep divides in analytic strategies, or merely a convenient distinction of approaches useful for textbooks but with no deep theoretical significance or precise empirical boundary. Despite his own involvement in rational choice theory through his work on exchange, Blau would disagree with the argument most rational choice thinkers make about the necessity of a methodological individualism, of tracing out the connections between individual action and social structure (cf. Coleman, 1986; Hechter, 1987). Another facet of this continuing dispute may be seen in looking at the closely related debate over "structure" versus "action" perspectives in sociological theory and research.

### The structure-action debate

An important shift in sociological thinking during the later 1970s and 1980s was to separate the conceptual distinction of structural versus action-oriented analysis from that between microsociology and macrosociology. This happened partly because "social structure" ceased to be a generic term for social organization and took on increasingly specific meanings under the influence first of the more cultural structuralisms of Levi-Strauss and Althusser, and then of the more purely sociological structuralisms of Blau and the network theorists. At the same time, understandings of human action were enriched by infusions of phenomenology, linguistic philosophy, and hermeneutics. The absence of self-aware, reflexively oriented, concrete actors in Parsons' self-proclaimed theory of action came to be seen more and more as a serious problem.<sup>19</sup> From various vantage points, then, structures were held to be more or less objective and yet to be the creatures of human action, simultaneously to emerge from interpersonal interaction and to constrain it. While some theorists simply staked out a particular answer to the relationship between structure and action by favoring one over the other, others set out ambitiously to integrate the two poles or overcome the dichotomy (most prominently, perhaps, Bourdieu with his reflexive theory of practice and Giddens with his structuration theory).<sup>20</sup>

The debate over the relationship of structure to action is different from the distinction between microsociology and macrosociology (a) because both micro and macro processes may be seen in structural terms, and (b) because treating human beings as knowledgeable actors creating their own societies makes for a different macrosociol-

ogy as well as microsociology. Nonetheless, some theorists tend to collapse the two distinctions. Structural thinkers (including Blau) often describe the advantages of their sociology by opposing it to the imputed individualism or focus on small-scale interpersonal transactions of microsociology. This is complemented by the tendency of symbolic interactionists (the most visible "action" theorists in American sociology) to undertake only microsociological research. The debate is not just over scale, however, but over the merits of the Durkheimian proposal (strongly endorsed by Blau) to treat social facts as external. And it is also over whether a successful sociology can be built on the one hand by ignoring or denying the hermeneutically informed and creative role of social action, or on the other by minimizing the extent to which patterns of human understanding and action rest on and are constrained by structures which it is not in the capacity of individuals to alter fundamentally.

Depending on whether "early Blau" or "late Blau" is emphasized, Blau weighs in on both sides of the structure-action debate (though never at the extreme action end of the continuum). His earlier works, particularly *The Dynamics of Bureaucracy* (1955; revised edition 1963) and *Exchange and Power* (1964) are finely developed arguments detailing the construction of social arrangements out of individual action and interpersonal relations. Though they address the multiple and complex ways in which individual actors define, interpret, exploit, and modify the social structures in which they live and work, they place the stress neither on the interpretative self-understanding of individuals nor on a voluntaristic approach to their action.

In *Dynamics* the approach is broadly functionalist. Processes of change are understood either as exogenous or as arising out of dysfunctions, which in turn are often unintended consequences of purposive change – such as the increasing use of statistical records. Individual action is understood as adaptation to social patterns, collectively either functional or dysfunctional (in the sense of Merton's paradigm for functionalist analysis as enunciated in the 1957 edition of *Social Theory and Social Structure*). *Dynamics* also includes a substantial social psychological theme, isolating the individual level processes (for example, anxiety over one's career prospects) that produce organizationally significant behavior. The empirical study (which was based on Blau's dissertation research) reports detailed, in-depth observation of the actions of bureaucrats in two public agencies. Blau describes, for example, how formal rules are adjusted, redefined, and amplified by the interpretations and actions of officials. And he documents the ways official goals are superseded as some types of intended change are resisted while others are embraced and extended by organizational participants. Also

in *Dynamics*, Blau starts addressing the theme of social exchange.<sup>21</sup> In particular, he describes the processes by which power differences are generated and then, sometimes, legitimated depending on the patterns of social approval and disapproval that accompany varying uses of sanctions. Formal positions and sanctions enter into these processes but primarily as resources to be expended (and as privileges whose value is enhanced by a refusal to use them); they influence action and interaction but do not strictly determine it.

As suggested earlier, *Exchange and Power* marks a partial step away from functionalism for Blau. Firstly, it enunciates a version of rational action theory which addresses interpersonal action in ways which focus on social regularities rather than individual thought processes (which is part of the importance of the use of economic models rather than a processual psychological notion of rationality). The argument takes structural context, rather than a notion of social needs, as the primary explanation for the courses of interaction, and draws primarily on a distributive notion of power rather than one in which power figures as potency or capacity. Secondly, the project in which this rational action theory is deployed is one in which the primary aim is to develop a causal theory of how formal structures arise rather than a functional theory of their interdependence. The step away from functionalism (the separation of the structural out of "structural functionalism") is only partial, however, for the reason suggested earlier. At the most macrosociological levels, *Exchange and Power* shifts explanatory strategy, introducing a reliance on shared values to accomplish social integration.

*Exchange and Power* is perhaps the work in which Blau came closest to fully integrating structural and action perspectives. Both the Simmelian and the Weberian influences in it are strong. Rational action theory is also particularly compatible with a structural sociology; indeed, it is such a likely complement to many forms of structuralism that it can be seen as more or less the implicit theory of action counterpart to most network theory. Rational action theory gives an account of individuals as formally similar (though their preferences may differ, this is basically a matter of content), and engaged in modes of behavior which are essentially regular. This allows structural analysis to bracket the individual level and treat it entirely in terms of the statistical patterns it yields through aggregation. Conversely, a conception of human beings as essentially rational actors is well suited to an analytic division between actor and context. Rational actors, in such a view, are constrained or empowered by structural factors in their social environments. Such factors can be represented in terms of interests and resources.

What other versions of action theory would find missing from such an account are (1) a sufficient attention to the impact of human beings' self-understanding on the social world, (2) a rich notion of individual creativity and distinctiveness, which entails not only more novelty and variation in patterns of action, but also problems of communication across lines of difference, and (3) a notion of intersubjectivity – that is, of the primacy of social existence in the constitution of human persons. Rational action theory, in other words, takes individuality as granted, even when, as in the hands of Blau, it is deployed in arguments about the importance of social factors. Many varieties of action theory would call into question this very idea of the obviousness or irreducibility of the individual subject.<sup>22</sup> Blau himself moved in the opposite direction, toward a more complete structuralism with less attention to actors and action. The trajectory of this movement can be seen best in his work on organizations.

Blau's early writings on organizational relations built on Weber's concept of bureaucracy and the insights of the human relations tradition of Barnard (1938) and Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939).<sup>23</sup> They shared much more with the subsequent "action" approach to organizations (Silverman, 1970; Salaman and Thompson, 1980) than did Blau's own later work. In the 1950s, Blau did not find it problematic to work with a general theoretical image of social structure as a system of patterned interactions that exists to the extent that they are repeated or continuous over time. In this image, social structure is constantly being both maintained and modified by the actions of its participants. Blau was particularly at pains to overcome an essentially static notion of bureaucratic organizational structure. He advanced the view that "informal" activities and interactions "form consistent patterns that are new elements of the organization . . . that organizations do not statically remain as they had been conceived but always develop into new forms of organization" (1955: 2). Blau, however, never thematized action as the focus of *sociological* attention. Where Silverman, for example, drew on phenomenology to develop his theory of organizations, Blau tended to treat the individual and idiosyncratic features of human action as exogenous empirical factors in his analyses. Action became a social fact primarily insofar as it was regular and patterned within an institution.

In his discussions of Weber, for example, Blau did not accept the position that social action was conceptually fundamental to the entire analytical scheme. As a result, he neither adopted the same sort of interpretative stance nor believed that successful causal explanation of social phenomena had to trace its origins back to human action. At the same time, Blau criticized Weber for focusing excessively on the

organizational blueprint of bureaucracy, on its formal normative structure, and paying too little attention to the emergence of informal relations and unofficial norms (1955: 2). He himself was drawn not only to informality but to the organizational patterning of even illicit behavior such as the taking of bribes. In the same sense, Blau later faulted the Weberian "ideal-type procedure" for "confusing the distinction between analytical attributes of social systems and prototypes of the social systems themselves," as well as for failing to differentiate conceptual elaborations and empirical hypotheses (Blau, 1963: 56-7; Blau and Scott, 1962: 32-6). Blau also faulted Weber for focusing too much "on the beliefs that legitimate authority while neglecting to conceptualize systematically the structural conditions that give rise to it" (1963: 57). In general, structural conditions have always been the independent variables of most interest to Blau. As he wrote in 1957:

In analyzing an organization, the major independent variables are the formal institutions in terms of which social conduct is organized: the division of labor, the hierarchy of offices, control and sanctioning mechanisms, production methods, official rules and regulations, personnel policies, and so on. The major dependent variables are the results accomplished by operations and the attachment of its members to the organization, as indicated by productive efficiency, changes effected in the community (say, a decline in crime rates), turnover, satisfaction with work, and various other effect criteria. To explain the relationships between these two sets of abstract variables, it is necessary to investigate the processes of social interaction and the interpersonal relations and group structures (1957: 70).

Not all the independent variables listed above are what Blau would today consider structural, but they are conceptualized as independent factors to which human beings respond. And the effects are social outcomes. Action itself appears to Blau as essentially a matter of sociopsychological concern, and one which is necessary only as a set of "*intervening variables drawn on to explain why social conditions give rise to certain patterns of conduct*" (1957: 70-71; original italics).

It was the necessity of attending to these intervening variables which Blau stressed in adopting the method of intensive case studies (combining both in-depth observations and interviews) of specific departments within larger bureaucracies. He saw it as necessary to collect repeated observations of actual interactions within and among groups. Given this methodological requirement, he initially concluded pessimistically that "the investigation of a large sample of organizations is hardly feasible" (1957: 59). But this opinion changed. Blau's work became more structural, partly because he determined during the 1960s that the methodological strictures he had earlier placed on himself – notably the requirement to attend to the full range

of interpersonal relations and concrete patterns of action – were mistaken.

Early signs of this change in approach are to be found in the book Blau and Scott coauthored in 1962, *Formal Organizations* (which carried the somewhat hopeful subtitle: *A Comparative Approach*). Although the analyses in this volume were restricted to data collected in only two organizations – a city and a county welfare department – and most attention was given to the effects of organizational structure on either individual or work group behavior, Blau and Scott did call for the systematic study of “a fair number” of formal organizations: “A study of a sample of work groups in a firm makes it possible to generalize about group structure, although not about the structure of formal organization. To arrive at the latter type of generalizations requires systematic comparison of a fair number of different organizations – ideally, a representative sample of them” (Blau and Scott, 1962: 13).

Indeed, in this book, Blau and Scott not only called for more studies involving multiple organizations but went beyond their own data to review and create organizational typologies and develop generalizations in which the dependent variables are various organizational characteristics, proposing both interorganizational and environment-organization propositions.<sup>24</sup> A central feature of these typologies addressed an implicit relationship of power to structure: Blau and Scott classified organizations on the basis of *cui bono*, that is, the people who benefit. “The benefits to one party furnish the reason for the organization’s existing, while the benefits to others are essentially a cost” (1962: 43). This approach marked a sharp contrast to approaches (for example, Cyert and March, 1963) which viewed the organization as the pattern resulting from the bargains struck among participants acting singly and in coalitions.

Blau was particularly intrigued by and attracted to the research of Stanley Udy, whose work was prominently reviewed in *Formal Organizations*. Udy utilized data collected by independent anthropologists and compiled in the Human Relations Area Files to study a large number of production organizations and the broader societal context in which they were located (Udy, 1959a, 1959b). The indicators employed of structural features were often crude, but Udy demonstrated to Blau’s satisfaction the feasibility of utilizing relatively simple indicators of the structural features of organizations in order to test general propositions about the characteristics of formal organizational structure.

Thus, in his Comparative Organization Research Program, conducted at the University of Chicago and Columbia University in the

1960s and 1970s, Blau and a host of collaborators carried out an extensive series of studies examining the structural characteristics of three diverse samples of organizations: public bureaucracies, universities, and manufacturing organizations (see Blau, Heydebrand, and Stauffer, 1966; Blau and Schoenherr, 1971; Blau, 1973; Blau et al., 1976). The conception of social structure developed in this research program is quite different from the earlier model of patterned interactions. As Blau and Schoenherr comment:

The collection of information from many organizations . . . is almost impossible without restricting the depth of the inquiry in any one. Even if it were economically feasible to obtain intensive data on interpersonal relations and individual conduct as well as organizational characteristics from a large number of organizations, the welter of information of diverse kinds would defy systematic analysis. Hence, a choice must be made between examining socio-psychological processes within an organization, taking its basic structure as given, and investigating the interdependence among elements in the structure of organizations, while ignoring the details of daily operations and human relations (1971: viii).

The data Blau and Schoenherr analyzed were drawn variously from informant reports, official records, organizational charts, personnel manuals, job descriptions, and performance ratings. These data take the formal structure of organizations as the object of investigation, based on the assumption that these structures "exhibit regularities that can be analyzed in their own right, independent of any knowledge about the individual behavior of their members" (Blau and Schoenherr, 1971: viii). Where for the earlier Blau formal structures were only a component, an aspect or a cause of social (including organizational) structure, Blau and Schoenherr treat formal structures as an independent level of reality:

A main theme emphasized throughout the book has been that the formal structure of organizations exhibits regularities of its own. Although organizations are made up of people, of course, and what happens in them is the result of decisions of human beings, regularities are observable in their structure that seem to be independent of the personalities and psychological dispositions of individual members (1971: 356).

Retorting to Homans' (1964) call for sociological models that "bring men back in" as active agents in building and rebuilding social structures, Blau and Schoenherr (1971: 357) conclude: ". . . in our sociological analysis as well as our political thinking, it is time that we "push men finally out," to place proper emphasis on the study of social structure in sociology."<sup>25</sup>

This shift in conception is softened and somewhat concealed by Blau's commitment to sociological pluralism and his stress on the le-

gitimacy of varying levels of analysis. At one level, he suggests, there are informal structures consisting of interpersonal relations and recurrent activities while at another level there are formal relations among official roles and activities encased in regulations and procedures. One line of criticism of this position has been the argument that official rules and roles tell us little about actual behavior – about the concrete actions, activities, and relations of social actors. At best, it is argued, these blueprints may tell us about the normative or prescriptive conceptions that exist in the heads of those who attempt to design organizational systems; at worst they describe managerial ideologies that attempt to generate a rational smokescreen in order to conceal arrangements that exhibit inequalities and exploitation.<sup>26</sup> Aspects of this critique actually harken back to Blau's own critique of previous studies of bureaucracy in the *Dynamics*. Blau himself has also been concerned to test empirically the salience of various formal categories in accounting for actual patterns of social behavior. Nonetheless, he appears to accept it as necessary in macrosociological work to assume that explicit formal descriptions – for example, organizational charts – have a greater significance than the informal activity which escapes them (though ideally Blau would focus not on the chart but on strictly "objective" indicators such as size of organizational units). Thus, as Collins (1979) has noted, Blau's (1977a) empirical index of power is simply the span of authority in an organization, which in effect means the number of employees under one's control. This leads Blau to reveal a very high level of concentration of power, even though rereading *The Dynamics of Bureaucracy* might have led Blau to reflect further on the importance of informal activities which give noticeable power to formal subordinates.

*The American Occupational Structure* (Blau and Duncan, 1967) figures somewhat ambiguously in the picture we are painting of Blau's gradual movement toward sociological structuralism. On the one hand, it is about an explicitly structural, macrosociological phenomenon. On the other hand, it does not approach that phenomenon in ways that would count as consistently structural in the terms of Blau's later theory.<sup>27</sup> There is, for example, an inclination to explain many putatively structural phenomena in terms of attitudes or evaluative orientations. Blau and Duncan rely rather heavily on a contrast between the characteristic orientations of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* to explain differential fertility: "we have speculated above that an important determinant of lower differential fertility as well as lower fertility rates is the calculating orientation toward human relations typical of *Gesellschafts* structures" (1967: 427; see also 416ff). The fact that this is speculation is perhaps significant. Where directly structural factors seem insuffi-

cient, then a cause is sought among cultural variables – but not subjected to the same sort of empirical test.

More generally, Blau and Duncan (in a chapter for which Blau was primarily responsible) focus on Parsons' particularism–universalism pattern variable as a key foundation for explaining mobility:

. . . universalism fosters a concern with materialistic values at the expense of spiritual ones; an interest in achievement and efficiency rather than religious devotion, philosophical contemplation, or artistic creation; a preoccupation with the outward signs of success and little patience for probing the deeper meanings of life. . . . The three structural causes of upward mobility in industrialized society [technological progress, migration, differential fertility] . . . have their roots in the predominance of universalism (1967: 430).

In *The American Occupational Structure*, this use of universalism appears as a borrowing from Parsons, lacking any independent support (and it is not clear that the notion could receive empirical support of the sort Blau would demand of more "material" claims).<sup>28</sup> Elsewhere, however, Blau had attempted to operationalize this aspect of Parsons' theory. Utilizing the same basic approach as his "structural effects" essay, he proposed inferring whether particularistic or universalistic standards govern the orientations of a group of people from the pattern of distribution of these orientations (Blau, 1962). Along with the general benefits of operationalizing Parsons' (and Shils') theory for better empirical research, Blau is concerned to show that the orientations governing people's interactions with each other are not independent of the particular relations which exist among them. This basic avenue was not one which Blau followed for long. Rather, he came fairly soon to make a more pronounced shift toward structuralism. This shift was best presaged by his work on organizations. By the standards of both *Exchange and Power* (1964) and *Inequality and Heterogeneity* (1977a), much of Blau's general theoretical work of the intervening period is somewhat incoherent. It reveals movement toward a structuralist account of social life, hampered by indecision about rejecting the prevailing functionalism of the time.<sup>29</sup>

Blau's mature structuralism was explicitly antifunctionalist. As Collins (1979) suggests, however, that did not make Blau any less the paradigmatic representative of Standard American Sociology (the phrase is from Mullins, 1973) than he had been at earlier stages of his career. As Blau had been a pacesetter in the development of an empirical sociology of organizations, in exchange theory, and in quantitative mobility studies, so he was in the rise of structuralism in the 1970s. His structuralism of population categories joined network analysis as a standard bearer for the structuralist claim to replace functionalism as the central theory of "Standard American Sociol-

ogy." Blau's macrostructural theory, however, has perhaps generated the most immediate controversy of any of his major lines of work. While it has sparked new inquiries by other prominent sociologists, it has also been criticized from a variety of vantage points – as excessively formalistic or excessively positivist, as addressing too limited a dimension of social life or too small a range of historical-comparative variation, as an apostasy from the rational action-individualistic first principles approach of exchange theory.<sup>30</sup> Here we will concentrate on the one line of criticism which has a direct bearing on our theme – the charge that Blau is at best inattentive to the importance of self-reflexive action, and with it culture and social theory.

Blau stakes out a very strongly structuralist position, denying that he needs to take either culture or individual actors into account. His aim is at least partly to redress what he regards as an imbalance in previous macrosociology:

Macrosociological theory in the United States has been dominated by an emphasis on the fundamental significance of cultural values and norms as the basic principles that determine the character of social systems and are the source of their social integration and order. The great influence of Parsons' theories is in good part responsible for this prevailing orientation. The structural theory advanced and tested may be considered as an attempt to compensate for this one-sided emphasis by calling attention to the significance of structural influences on social life (Blau and Schwartz, 1984: 214).

Blau starts by working out the implications of a set of fairly simple propositions – showing, for example, that other things being equal, a smaller group will have more outgroup relations than a larger group. As the number of basic theorems and propositions grows, however, the theory rapidly becomes complex. The general ordering ideas are that social structure is "a multidimensional space of different social positions among which a population is distributed" and that the focus of inquiry is the "analysis of the various forms structural differentiation assumes, changes in them, and their implications for social association" (Blau, 1977a: 4).<sup>31</sup>

The main substantive theme which Blau pursues, and the motivation for his focus on structural differentiation, is the problem of social integration. This is raised generally as it has influenced the broad Durkheimian tradition, but reformulated to take up not functional interdependence or common culture but only the extent to which personal associations link people together. As Collins (1979) has suggested, the specific problems of American pluralism – for example, relations among ethnic groups – seem to inform Blau's thinking as much as the broader problematic of social integration. Blau's procedure is essentially to look for those categories into which the popula-

tion is divided, and to ask of each how they affect rates of interactions among their members and between them and members of other groups.<sup>32</sup> A central argument, thus, is that spatial segregation is far worse for social integration (that is, far more limiting of intergroup relations) than are inequalities within communities and work organizations.

This approach to social integration at once marks an important advantage to Blau's theory and also a central blind spot. The advantage is that attention is focused on concrete interpersonal relations. Theorists like Parsons and Habermas approach social integration in ways turning on values and orientations to action, developing their accounts with virtually no reference to concrete structures of social relationships as instantiated in interaction (see Calhoun, forthcoming). The blind spot is that by seeing this structural dimension as the whole of social integration, Blau rules out of his theoretical purview the entire problem of what – beyond simple sociability – holds society together. Not only functional interdependence but the active role of power relations are removed from theoretical sight.<sup>33</sup> We need to ask two questions of this notion of social integration. First, does this purely structural understanding give us a rich enough concept of society to justify Blau's (perhaps polemically overstated) contention that the task of studying structural parameters delimits the distinctive concern of sociology? It would be one thing to argue that such a structural account is a necessary underpinning to any account of social integration in terms of values, intentions, functional interdependence, and so forth, but it is another to take the geometry of interaction patterns as definitive of social integration. Secondly, and conversely, is it really the case that widespread social integration in Blau's structural sense is generally important to social life or organization? In Collins' words:

there have been societies throughout history with all sorts of degrees and patterns of social ties and social barriers, highly stratified societies with near perfect correlations of wealth, power, ethnicity, and all the rest, as well as many other forms, with and without intergroup friendships. *All* are equally societies, and in fact, they represent the empirical range of structures that a truly general theory should account for (1979: 328).<sup>34</sup>

Questions about Blau's structural concept of social integration, then, concern whether his theory should be considered to address macrosociology in general (that is, both the range of societies and the bulk of what organizes each) or only an aspect of macrosociology.

Central questions have also been raised about Blau's opposition of structure to action and his claim to develop his theory without reliance on cultural factors. These are closely related points. Blau wishes

to show the impact which the structure of positions, defined in terms of population parameters, has on social relations "independently of cultural values and psychological motives" (1979b: 28). For him, as we discussed in the previous section, reference to action always seems to be a movement outside of sociology into the realm of a highly individualistic psychology, largely because his understanding of human action does not include a notion of the intersubjective construction of actors.<sup>35</sup> Blau presumes action, both insofar as his basic units of measurement for association are interaction rates, and because he is concerned to show the constraining effects of social structure over individual action. The problem arises in the conceptualization of social structure as radically distinct from action (rather than, say, as enduringly patterned social action). Blau reifies structure rather than calling attention to the problem of studying its reproduction. Even so, Blau cannot get away from implicit dependence on some notion of agency: "The very term 'position,' so basic to Blau's notion of structure, clearly involves agents' concepts. Social positions, like all other aspects of 'structural parameters,' exist only in so far as actors make discriminations in their conduct based upon the attribution of certain identities to others" (Giddens, 1985: 211). One should add that this comment is unlikely to trouble Blau very much, because his concern is with the regular patterns of such discriminations (and their consequences), not with cultural, hermeneutic and/or psychological accounts of the process of discrimination.

Blau's concern to avoid reliance on culture seems to stem in part from his attempt to distance himself from Parsons, in part from concerns that it can never be studied with the empirical precision he desires, and in part from a sense that it involves yielding the materialist terrain of inquiry to an idealist notion not unlike that of psychological motives.<sup>36</sup> Yet in two senses Blau's claim of avoiding reliance on culture must be spurious. First, theoretically, the very categories of Blau's structural analysis must be seen as largely cultural. Kinship categories, for example, like all others, depend on meanings mutually recognized among agents. They cannot, on the very logic of Blau's theory, be said to follow from the differential rates of ingroup and outgroup association. They must either be coequal with them or precede them. Secondly, there is a methodological sense in which structuralists such as Blau cannot do without culture. As noted earlier, some form of (so far generally implicit) "field work" must be employed to discover what sorts of categories might be salient for a given social structure. What this generally means is learning something of the culture of the actors in question. And in the existing studies by Blau and various others using his theory, this has meant simply

that they live in the United States and are prepared to intuit categories from American culture without further ado.<sup>37</sup>

Even in his earliest work, where Blau was clearly concerned with social action, he did not take a particularly strongly voluntarist position or employ a strong notion of the self-reflexive, interpretative character of the actor.<sup>38</sup> In *Exchange and Power*, his treatment was largely congruent with rational choice theory and thus based on rather strong assumptions about an actor's rationality.<sup>39</sup> This distanced Blau from the various "constructivist" approaches to human individuality and social action which flowered during and after the late 1960s and early 1970s. These approaches were influenced somewhat by the continuation of symbolic interactionism (though theoretical revitalization of that tradition by reestablishment of its connections with Peirce and other early pragmatists besides Mead would not occur for a few years); by the rediscovery of phenomenology (for example, in Berger and Luckmann, 1967); and perhaps most importantly by the debates over cross-cultural comparison, including especially evaluation of rationality (Winch, 1965, was the most important catalyst to this debate; see Wilson, ed., 1970 and Hollis and Lukes, eds., 1984). Most of the work in these traditions made as little contact with structural sociology (or the rest of Standard American Sociology) as Blau did with it. And certainly Winch's position and some others following his seemed not only to challenge positivism but to make the very program of systematic, cross-culturally valid empirical research suspect or impossible. This did not make their arguments more attractive to most researchers, including Blau. By the time the effort to make a link between macrosociology and these various action-oriented approaches came into prominence (with the work, for example, of Collins, 1975 and Giddens, 1979 – to mention only sources from within the English language sociological world), Blau was already committed to the structuralist program toward which his work had been moving for years.

## Conclusion

Like his intellectual ancestor, Max Weber, Blau throughout his long career has combined a commitment to conducting neutral, objective scientific research with a passion for preserving and defending democratic political institutions and advancing the social conditions that sustain them. Blau ambivalently reflects the best of two, somewhat conflicting, roles: objective scientist and involved citizen.<sup>40</sup> One of the links between the two commitments is Blau's very interest in how structures (whether of interpersonal relations or more impersonal po-

sitions) empower and constrain actors; democracy, Blau has suggested, depends primarily on institutional arrangements not voluntary choices. Indeed, relying too much on individual goodwill or shared values unsustained by structural arrangements would be likely to doom democracy.

In every one of his major studies Blau pauses, usually at the end of the volume, to comment on the broader social and political implications of the subject at hand. A common theme, found throughout the corpus of his work, is the dilemma posed for society by the existence and power of large-scale, bureaucratic organizations. Blau is no naive populist calling for a return to simpler forms and better times, but a sophisticated observer, noting both the benefits and costs of widespread bureaucratization.

On the one hand, bureaucratic organizations are the indispensable means for utilizing complex technologies and providing the social framework to support an advanced division of labor—arrangements with which are associated substantial social and economic benefits. On the other hand, organizations are or can be the locus of many social ills: as impersonal agencies that provide inappropriate or insensitive treatment to clients (Blau, 1955); as corporate structures that mobilize power in support of purposes that can be inimical to human welfare (Blau and Schoenherr, 1971); as overly centralized bureaucracies that have deleterious consequences for the exercise of professional discretion (Blau, 1973); as oligarchies nonresponsive to membership interests (Blau, 1956); and as representatives of powerful blocks that can threaten individual liberty and undermine democratic institutions (Blau and Schoenherr, 1971).

Blau addresses similar concerns in his analyses of stratification systems and wider social structures. Thus in *The American Occupational Structure* (Blau and Duncan, 1967), he explores the meaning of observed mobility rates as indicators of social opportunity and ponders their implications for maintaining a stable democracy. And in the preface to *Inequality and Heterogeneity* Blau forthrightly announces "My bias with respect to the two generic forms of differentiation is that there is too much inequality but that there cannot be too much heterogeneity" (1977a: x). And why the preference for heterogeneity? Because the "viability of democratic institutions depends on strongly intersecting parameters" (1977: 274), the social conditions associated with high levels of heterogeneity.<sup>41</sup>

Blau's sociological work has almost never been historical, and has sometimes been faulted for its lack of historical and cross-cultural perspectives. Nonetheless, both Blau's discussions of empirical findings on social structure and his prescriptive concerns for the fate of demo-

cratic society are linked to a complex, dialectical view of human history. His view is neither one of uniform progress nor of endless cycles, but rather of continuing social reorganization and change as each basic realignment of social forces gives rise to counter-pressures and eventually to new configurations. Solutions bring new problems, but at least they are *new* problems, not the same old ones. Blau promises us novelty, if not assured progress, as we attempt to understand and improve our social institutions.

## Notes

1 The younger author of this essay can remember Blau startling a seminar of Columbia graduate students accustomed to faculty who bristled at the hint of criticism and defended every word they ever wrote when he began a presentation: "Among those theorists with whom I must disagree is Peter Blau . . ." This willingness to rethink his own previous positions, together with an intellectualism remarkably untinged with egoism, is quite likely a central reason for the fact that Blau, nearly alone among modern sociologists, has remained a creative and productive researcher and theorist into his seventies. He has charted new paths for himself and others in each of four decades. And at least as remarkably, he has still been willing to submit his articles for anonymous peer review in the leading journals well past the point when his fame made this unnecessary.

2 In 1969, Blau wrote that he considered "it one of the great accomplishments of sociology in the past twenty years to have brought theory and research closer together," but he went on to argue against setting such restrictive and unrealistic standards for what counted as a good theory that theorizing itself would be stifled.

3 Actually, it is somewhat more completely identified with that problematic than may be appropriate. As Blau himself has recognized (1969), Weber's main concern was not with organizational structure, or with how characteristics of bureaucracy affect human conduct, but with the more historical question of how bureaucracy, as a form of social structure, came about. While Blau never took up this historical question as a focus for his research, he did join Weber in making the characteristics of organizations dependent variables in analysis – a central focus of his comparative organizational research project.

4 Collins thus is somewhat misleading in reporting a "newfound attitude toward Marxism" as "a sign of the times" in *Inequality and Heterogeneity*:

. . . formerly taboo terms such as "capitalism" and "dialectical" are found here and there on his pages, and he takes a decidedly pessimistic and critical view of many aspects of modern America that were once polemically defended: discerning a trend of increasing concentration of organizational power, giving a theoretical explanation for the coalescence of a power elite, suggesting that democracy only works well on issues people care little about, and calling for some way to increase participatory democracy in the organizations that surround us (1979:324).

Collins' general characterization of American sociology may have something to it, but less so for Blau than he implies. Blau's 1960 article on "structural effects" begins by classifying Marx as a structuralist student of networks of social relationships, and Marx was cited (albeit usually trivially) in Blau's work over a period of decades. Blau was

even prepared to accept, at least in part, a characterization of himself as a dialectical sociologist (Blau, 1972); and in fact used the notion of "dialectical development" to describe organizational change as early as 1957 (Blau, 1957: 72; see also Blau and Scott, 1962: 250-53). More to the point, Blau's work was frequently critical of existing patterns in American society well before *Inequality and Heterogeneity*, though that book did offer more sustained criticism.

5 See Levine, Carter, and Gorman (1975) on this and other influences of Simmel.

6 Or, at least, that side of Durkheim's ambivalence. As Alexander (1983) has shown, Durkheim struggled unsuccessfully throughout his career to overcome or even balance a tension between an objectivistic, external approach to social phenomena and a recognition of the importance of culture, ideas, and action.

7 Of course, any Durkheimian influence here was overdetermined by Weber, who incorporated division of labor into his concept of bureaucracy, with which Blau began his investigation and his book.

8 Actually Blau's definition of parameters changed slightly between *Inequality and Heterogeneity* (1977a:6) and *Crosscutting Social Circles* (1984:10). In the earlier usage it referred to the dimensions of variation themselves (for example, age); in the latter usage, it refers to the characteristics of the distribution in a given dimension (for example, the age distribution).

9 This usage helps to explain why he can speak as though internalization were not a necessary feature of values as social facts.

10 Blau's earlier position is still quite current in sociological theory, though it is no longer his; see Coleman's (1986, 1987) arguments for the need to establish micro to macro relations in order to achieve full sociological explanation.

11 Blau's reliance on economic understandings of self-interested individual rationality contrasted rather sharply with Durkheim, however, as Ekeh (1974) has argued; see discussion following.

12 Levine, Carter, and Gorman (1975: 1126) describe Blau's work as revitalizing (though not citing) "von Wiese and Becker's project (1932) of grounding the analysis of complex societal processes on the properties of microscopic interpersonal transactions." More recent advocates of microfoundations for macrosociology than Blau (for example, James Coleman and Michael Hechter) have also passed over this antecedent for their work. In fact, for much of his career, Coleman seems to have regarded the attempt to explain macrosociological phenomena on the basis of the assumption of self-interested, rational individuals to be a new effort begun at the earliest by Homans, not a continuation of a tradition as old as social contract theory and utilitarianism (see Coleman, 1964, 1966, and discussion in Ekeh, 1974).

13 "... microsociological and macrosociological theories require different approaches and conceptual schemes, and their distinct perspectives enrich each other ..." (1986: xv; see also 1977a: 1-3 where Blau argues that the choice between micro and macro level research strategies should be made on pragmatic grounds).

14 This raises a theoretical as well as an empirical-practical tension, however, between the need for intergroup relations to promote societal integration, and ingroup relations to create groups. It is not clear that a society of any size which completely lacked internal differentiation in the sense of Blau's structural parameters - that is, one in which there were no significant groupings which could predict patterns of interaction - could be considered well integrated (or for that matter could exist). In other words, one might suggest that the existence of intermediate structures (groups) is necessary to social integration, even though such integration depends on relations among them.

15 This is, presumably, a criticism Bierstedt would level at most varieties of rational-

choice theory, including that of Hechter (1987) who claims what he takes to be the methodologically individualistic Blau of *Exchange and Power* as a direct ancestor but expresses distaste for his later structuralism.

16 It is necessary to say that culture plays "little or no direct role" because Blau himself is somewhat ambiguous on this. He tends to make an extremely strong distinction between culture and social structure and to argue that he is concerned only with the latter (though social structure may be an important independent variable to explain patterns in cultural institutions; see, among several of Blau's recent works, Blau, Blau and Golden, 1985). This strong distinction is in part disingenuous, however, for Blau's (or other researchers') own inexplicit knowledge of cultural categories in U.S. society must inescapably figure in the identification of potentially salient parameters. This is especially important for nominal parameters, which are hard to conceive of except in cultural terms, however much they may be studied in terms of a structural theory. This is a point Blau has conceded in oral discussion, though it has not figured in his writing or theoretical elaboration as far as we know.

17 He also began a program of large-scale surveys of formal organizational structure, aiming to advance beyond studies of particular organizations through an explicitly comparative approach (Blau and Schoenherr, 1971; the groundwork for this approach was laid in Blau and Scott, 1962). See discussion in the introduction to Section III below.

18 Blau has always been drawn to paradoxes, both apparent ones which can be solved by recognizing the effects of intervening variables or contingencies, and inescapable ones like the "paradox of power" (Blau, 1977a) which is that as power is increasingly centralized, there is a correlated reduction in overall inequality (measured in Blau's terms of aggregated interpersonal differences, not in Marxian class terms) because the large mass of the population is left equally without power.

19 This was true even for many who followed fairly closely in Parsons' footsteps. Neofunctionalists have tended to divide into two groups. One, best represented perhaps by Niklas Luhmann, has followed up Parsons' borrowings from evolutionary theory and his interest in cybernetics and general systems theory. The other, of whom Jeffrey Alexander is the leading proponent, has tried to introduce a stronger emphasis on human action.

20 These sociological theories are also part of a broader discourse shaped significantly by the various schools of thought sometimes grouped together as "poststructuralist" or "postmodernist." Bourdieu, for example, is part of the French reaction to the dominance of Levi-Strauss and Althusser, shaped by the "structuralist moment" yet aiming to transcend it. Giddens is much influenced by Foucault and by the broader problematic of paying attention to action (and to its physical embodiment) without making a theory simply or ideologically individualistic.

21 George Homans credits Blau's book with a central role in the development of his own theory of social exchange (Homans, 1958, 1961; see also Homans' contribution to the present volume); Homans found *Dynamics* to be "an admirable book: a model of method, rich in observation, simple yet adequate in demonstration, with a variety of hypotheses, supported, but not overwhelmed, by quantitative data, which bear on the most important problems not only of bureaucracy but of small-group organization in general" (1955: 491). Blau (1986) suggests that Homans' review of *Dynamics* had in its turn a significant "sleeping" effect on him. Homans had suggested that *The Dynamics of Bureaucracy* was misnamed because it was not so much about bureaucracy as about informal relations in work groups. This, Blau suggests, was one of the spurs that led him to turn his attention in the 1960s away from intensive case studies and toward quantitative comparative studies of organizational structure.

22 As, for that matter, would some varieties of structuralism. As Louis Dumont puts

the critique: "Our idea of society remains superficial so long as we take it, as the word suggests, as a sort of association which the fully formed individual enters voluntarily and with a definite aim, as if by a contract" (1966:5). Such a critique only partially challenges Blau's exchange theory, which does make a strong assumed division between fully formed individuals and society, but which also emphasizes the inescapably social nature of all interactions and never posits a primacy of individuals. For an instructive recent debate in which Sewell makes a similar criticism against Coleman, the force of which the latter appears not to recognize, see Coleman (1986), Sewell (1986), Wacquant and Calhoun (1988).

23 As Gordon (1976: 475) has noted, making a bridge between these two lines of work was unusual in the 1950s, and Blau pioneered it.

24 Simpson's review of *Formal Organizations* is ironic from the vantage point of a retrospective on Blau's career: "As a text in formal organization this book offers little for the instructor who is interested in studying structural properties of organizations. For the instructor whose main concern is behavior within organizations it would be an excellent choice" (1963: 85).

25 The political point being made is that a naive voluntarism impedes the kind of attention to basic structural issues needed to make a large-scale democracy work. The same view, for example, would characterize Blau's very negative evaluation of the sociological content of *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah, et al., 1985). For some of his reflections on structural factors affecting democracy, see *Inequality and Heterogeneity* (1977a). In addition to his general argument about the near-ubiquity of inequality, Blau suggests that democracy is generally only effective with regard to issues about which people care relatively little.

26 In discussing *Formal Organizations*, Albrow (1964: 354) made a similar point. Blau and Scott treated formal organization as a necessary feature of and exclusive to collectivities oriented to specific goals,

instead of an element in a large variety of social situations. If their study of organizations were genuinely interdisciplinary they might have learned from the demise of social contract theories that formal institutions in the political sphere are not best explained by the myth of prior construction and that the precision of the formal rules may be far in advance of any agreement on their objectives.

It is not clear that the apparent demise of social contract theories was in fact final; nonetheless, a variety of social arrangements – for example, kinship systems – rely on formal rules the intention and origins of which are at the least quite obscure, and which are often very imperfectly reflected in actual practice (though this does not mean that they are irrelevant). Albrow (1964:353) also points to a lack of historicity and neorationalism in *Formal Organizations*; these are two faults which critics are apt to find with Blau's work in general, though rationalism ceased to be so prominent a theme after the 1960s.

27 And, as Coleman (1987) has suggested, it is not consistently macrosociological either, even though it marked a milestone in the development of sound macrosociological argument. The study's virtue, for Coleman, is its use of a well-defined social unit – the adult male U.S. population. Its failing is that despite the macrosociological theme, the relations actually studied remain entirely at an individual level: "The nationally representative sample allows descriptive characterizations of the occupational distributions and movements but cannot provide parameters for a model of the labor market process, because individuals' movements are treated as wholly independent (1987: 164).

28 For example, how would one show that universalism "fosters" (that is, is an independent or contingent cause of) the phenomena described rather than simply a more general description of them?

29 This is not to suggest that Blau's writings of this period are not of major significance for sociology; they are. The standing of *The American Occupational Structure* can be gauged from its status as a "citation classic," or from Blalock's review: "this is the most sophisticated and careful quantitative study that I have seen in the sociological literature. It should be 'must' reading not only for stratification specialists and methodologists, but for all sociologists" (1968: 297). And somewhat surprisingly, considering the enormous literature on "status attainment" it helped to spawn, Blau and Duncan's book remains ahead of the field of mobility studies in some important respects. For example, the observation Bottomore made in his review remained essentially (and rather unfortunately and surprisingly) true for twenty years after Blau and Duncan wrote, "It is a virtue of the book that it discusses quite fully downward mobility; many sociologists seem to have an acquired disposition to think of mobility exclusively in 'upward' terms" (1968: 294). Moreover although the contributions of *The American Occupational Structure* are primarily empirical, there are still significant theoretical linkages between it and segments of Blau's later structuralism. In *Inequality and Heterogeneity* (1977a), for example, Blau argues that social mobility is the cause of most social change, and renders in more formal and developed theoretical fashion a number of points about the implications of social structure for mobility (and vice versa) which he first introduced in the earlier book. For example, *The American Occupational Structure* did include considerations of the impact of such quintessentially structural factors (in the terms of the later Blau) as the impact of extent of inequality and of numbers of people in different strata on opportunities for mobility. And in *Inequality and Heterogeneity* Blau builds on these to reach more complex conclusions such as the argument that mobility is promoted by pluralism, but once mobility takes place, pluralism declines (because the mobility allowed people to achieve greater homogamy). Nevertheless, the slightly peripheral place of *The American Occupational Structure* in Blau's theoretical trajectory can be gathered from a recent autobiographical reflection in which Blau describes himself as having written *Exchange and Power* and then, "Before I returned to primarily theoretical analysis, however, I spent more than a decade conducting empirical research on bureaucratic organizations of various kinds" (1987: 74). He makes no mention of *The American Occupational Structure*.

30 This last charge comes from Hechter (1987: 6) who somewhat too simplistically describes Blau's *Exchange and Power* as involving a strong methodological individualism from which Blau later recanted. As we have seen, however, *Exchange and Power* was already significantly structuralist, and throughout rejected a psychological individualism, though its economic model of man did presume a kind of individualism.

31 It is impossible to do justice to the complexity and subtlety of the theory here. *Inequality and Heterogeneity* (Blau, 1977a) remains the main source for the theory; *Cross-Cutting Social Circles* (Blau and Schwartz, 1984) is primarily an attempt to test it empirically though it introduces a number of theoretical refinements. Blau (1977b) is the most useful shorter version of the complex whole. Turner (1986: 425-34) is a good generalists' or students' introduction. See also the articles in the last section of the present book.

32 In this respect, there is a continuity between Blau's later, more explicitly and substantially structuralist formulation, and his early (largely microsociological) effort to develop a theory of social integration (1960b). In both cases, rates of concrete interaction - generally speaking, patterns of attraction and friendly sociable interaction - are the stuff of the social integration to which he refers. In between, in *Exchange and Power*, he draws heavily on accounts of shared values to explain macrosocial integration.

33 Blau certainly focuses considerable attention on power, but usually by examining distributions of power (where power itself is seen as a finite resource in a zero-sum relationship). Blau frequently notes the *ceteris paribus* character of the structural patterns he identifies. We might bring one dimension of the role of power into focus by following the strategy of *Formal Organizations* and asking *cui bono?* Who benefits from other things remaining equal? What power may have been exerted to bring about the structure of conditions and constraints which forms the backdrop against which any particular structural factor is weighed?

34 Actually, Blau's theory is of somewhat more comparative historical validity or usefulness than Collins suggests. While Blau's notion of social integration does not provide openings to explaining what holds societies together in very many cases (and arguably not adequately in the U.S. case on which it is implicitly based), the theory is full of more specific propositions and deductions which are valid in a wide variety of settings. Indeed, many of them – the deductions from group size, for example – are sufficiently formal (in Simmel's sense) that they would apply in all empirical contexts (though the macrosociological significance of their application might vary). They would apply at least as structural *constraints*, problems which any particular course of action must address, or as structural *conditions* which exert a selective force by making some courses of action impossible and others more or less difficult or easy.

35 Mayhew (1980a,b) has offered an even more polemically extreme statement of the structuralist position than Blau (though it is broadly congruent with Blau's and Blau has expressed approval of it). Mayhew's extreme statement allows critics (like Giddens, 1985) a somewhat easier target.

36 Thus, Giddens comments, "Blau's approach confuses the demand to distinguish the influence of structural properties from psychological explanations of conduct on the one hand with the assertion that structural parameters can be defined independently of 'values,' 'norms' or 'cultural traditions' on the other" (1985: 210–11). Blau is also happy to grant culture to anthropology and action to psychology in a disciplinary division of labor (one perhaps ironically reminiscent of Parsons' division of cultural, personality, and social systems).

37 Silverman offered a similar criticism in his review of *The Structure of Organizations*: [Blau and Schoenherr] have inescapably relied on tacit knowledge gained as everyday participants . . . as is so often the case, by using this knowledge as an unexplicated resource, the authors fail, in any apparent sense, to make problematic the social order which they purportedly investigate. It is as if a linguist were to seek to understand the structure of his own language while *unselfconsciously relying upon his native knowledge of grammar to interpret the sentences which he examined*" (1971: 456).

This is the source of some ethnocentrism in certain specifics of the theory – for example, its treatment of the division of labor or its analysis of kinship relations and fertility, both colored primarily by the last hundred-plus years of Western, especially U.S., experience. The implicit unidirectional evolutionism of the theory exacerbates this problem (Collins, 1979).

38 His early work on bureaucratic group structures and social exchange did pay a good deal of attention to cultural beliefs, norms, and values. Among his most important early contributions was his analysis of the emergence of social norms within work groups to regulate competition, govern performance, and constrain the arbitrary exercise of power (Blau, 1955; Blau and Scott, 1962). And his analysis of exchange devotes attention to the development of norms insuring trust, defining fair exchange, and legitimating the exercise of influence based on unequal exchanges (Blau, 1964).

39 However, unlike some later rational action theorists, Blau (a) argued that although individual calculations of costs and benefits enter into many types of social transactions, they are governed by socially constructed and enforced norms and constrained by emergent, encompassing, institutionalized social frameworks, and (b) insisted that social exchange only accounts for a part of the whole range of human action, not its entirety. Blau specifically excluded from the purview of exchange theory action performed under coercion or dictated by internalized norms (in the sense of Weber's value-rational orientation to action).

40 During periods when the possibility and desirability of keeping these roles distinct has been sharply debated, Blau has consistently called for objectivity and value-neutrality in scientific research. This is a view in harmony with his positivism and structuralism, and it may be one more reason for his disinclination to venture more into the realms of action theory and substantive cultural analysis.

41 And perhaps, biographically, because as a youth Blau fled Austria as Nazism took control, and made his way as a Jewish immigrant in the United States, well aware of anti-Semitism, but appreciative of institutional arrangements which held it in check and promoted intergroup relations.

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