

The Study of 'Structures'

Hailun Li

School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK.

Abstract

The analysis of structure plays an indispensable role in political science, but there are different meanings for the concept of structure and structuralism according to different theorists. This paper will provide four explanations to help understand the "structures".

Keywords

Structure, Structuralism, intentionalism, Structuration theory, strategic-relational approach, Morphogenetic approach.

1. Introduction

The fierce controversy about structuralism and intentionalism which could predominate the area of social science, especially in the aspect of politics, lasts for nearly hundreds of years. The speed of dispute in the general disciplines has been quicker than the political level (Marsh & Stoker, 2002). The controversy is deeply based on the problem of structure and agent that also contributes to the confusion about how to analyze and explain the phenomenon in political science. Although there are some issues exist in the study of 'structure', it still can be considered as an approach to effectively explain political outcomes and the 'structure' is used satisfactorily in the political research. Personally, the morphogenetic approach can be deemed as a better method that is about the interplay of structure and agent. This essay will give a focus on 'structure' rather than 'agency', explain the reason why it is useful to study the political outcomes and analyse four main theories such as general structure, structuration theory, the strategic-relational approach as well as morphogenetic approach, and why the last one is better than the others.

2. The Definition of the Structure and Structuralism

Due to this problem, there are some other arguments over the analysis of micro and macro, the methodology of individualism and holism and so on (Halperin & Heath, 2012). Generally, the conception of 'structuralism' which means that individuals are shaped by the environment that they live gives priority to the structure (context or environment) and the term of 'intentionalism' meaning that people can use their ability to determine their future is agency-centred method (conduct or intention) (Marsh & Stoker, 2002).

First and foremost, the structure and the structuralism have been reviewed and conceptualising. The structure that is mentioned above essentially can be defined as the context or the environment that individuals' act and have a huge impact on their action and can also usually refer to some factors existing in the society (Hay, 2002). The structuralism can be defined as a theoretical method that analyzes political phenomenon through the focus on structure and is derived from the study of language. Moreover, according to Marsh and Stoker (2002 and 1995), structuralism emphasizes the position of the 'structure' and means that individuals acting in the social context or circumstance are largely limited by the structure and they cannot get rid of outside pressure. For example, Marx (Marsh & Stoker, 1995) thought that superstructure is underpinned by the economic condition that results in the economic relation and materials can determine the intention. So, he said that history is established by the people, but not on the

basis of their own willing, instead under fixed and inherited conditions or the past. Therefore, the basic description has been exhibited by these conceptions and it is important for the next parts.

3. Four Different Theories about 'Structures'

3.1. The General Structuralism

The general structuralism can be called pure structuralism which means that the action of individuals is absolutely determined by the setting of the political in which individuals are seen as the production of the structure, just like artware and people merely automatically response to the external environment, so, they cannot transform the society into what they in favour of (Marsh & Stoker, 2002). This is basically similar to the institutional approach which is came up by Kavanagh, but the difference is that the method reduced the scope of 'structure' to formal form. He argued that the subjective action could be simply ignored and the independent context has a major decisive effect in human behaviour (Kavanagh, 1983). There is an instance such as a 'glass ceiling' theory. Kende (1994) drew a sentence, women employees cannot get a higher position in the governments or corporations and cannot recognise the potential reason. This is due to the fact that there is discrimination against the female in the social context, rather than the lack of ability and technique, although this kind of discrimination has not been apparently presented. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the theory is too absolute to adopt to analyse political inquiry because it is similar to outcomes that cannot be predictable exactly in the area of human science. Additionally, structuralists cannot consider structure as the position of overdetermination, and simultaneously, the situation needs to think that the structure cannot be recognised as the opponent over the agent, which is called 'dualism' (Hay, 2002).

Apart from the development of structuralism, the intentionalism also criticised the general structuralism, like rational choice theory in terms of agent. This theory gives priority to the rationality from the people's ability in the economy, and rational people can measure advantage and disadvantage to choose the best one when they face a large number of choices (Parsons, 2005). Therefore, the factors of the agency also have an influence on the structure to some extent, and the link between them should indeed be considered.

3.2. Structuration Theory

Because of many scientists devoting to the development of research of the structural theory, some dialectical approaches that go satisfactorily beyond the previous one has appeared, including the strategic-relational approach and morphogenetic approach, structuration theory which will be analysed in the next part.

The definition of the structuration theory is put forward by Giddens who tried his best to change the pattern about traditional dualism in the respect of structure and agency using the thought of duality. Giddens (1984) thought that the agency which has a pivotal impact on the structure can also be determined by it; they interact with each other, just like front and back of the coin, but in the ontology, there is a disparate view. Marsh and Stoker (2002) as a structuralist had concluded from Giddens's point of view that there are some limitations and opportunities existing in the context in which actors possessing agency could be ruled or promoted for their movements. There is an example. The constrain and assistance (material or mental) are provided to individuals with permission of residence in the European Union (EU), and though if employees are treated unfairly, the EU will help them maintain their legitimate demands, the citizens have to be secured with compliance (Marsh & Stoker, 2002). However, the theory is criticised by many structuralists and intentionalism: Firstly, it did not provide the orientation about how to practice for research, and because of the independence of the two sides, the accurate connection between structure and agency could be followed temporarily

(Layder, 1997); Secondly, there is a distinct separation in the analysis which means that merely one side can be grasped instead of both of them (Hay, 2002); finally, Archer (1996) confirms that it is aborted since the simple linkage is what makes it pointless to distinguish structure as well as agency and hardly tests the relationship between them. Therefore, this theory might be seen as one of the methods to comprehend the relation between structure and agency, not be the only way.

3.3. The Strategic-Relational Approach

The strategic-relational approach that is invented by Hay consists of three basic elements, including strategy, strategically selective and strategic learning. The strategy could be recognised as a determined point throughout the entire process, which means that there is an existing structural environment before the act happening, and then the backgrounded actors choose an appropriate strategy. For instance, the wealthier people have more chance to the Waldorf Hotel than those earning less, due to the fact that this hotel is built for this kind of actors (Marsh & Stoker, 2002). Individuals possessing the capability could transform the social structure by proactive strategy learning (Hay, 2002). An example can be used to explain the phenomena. If a job hunter fails to find a satisfying career for their own reason, they may improve themselves through learning and feedback on previous failures, so as to prepare for the next success (Marsh & Stoker, 2002). The content above about the structuralism is a simple description, but it seems to be more acceptable. However, from the perspective of the postmodernist, neither 'structure' nor 'agency' really exist, and their relation is also unreal because there is a big problem that can be seen as a point which applies the existing discourse to explain the political phenomenon (Howarth, 1995). Additionally, the approach seems to mainly attach importance to the capacity of individuals (the ideational). Although the actors freely use value or term to define materials and stress the importance of this value, these materials (structure) endowed with the value ultimately influence human behavior (Cotton, 2015). Therefore, the structuration theory should continue to be improved in the future.

3.4. Morphogenetic Approach

The fourth method is called the 'morphogenetic approach' developed by Archer. The alter of 'time' is utilized appropriately in the interaction between context and conduct (structure and agency), meaning that there are three periods of time; the first period of time could be deemed T1, the second period is considered as T2 and the last is T3. The T1 is the structural conditioning in terms of the importance of the pre-existing structure within which individuals' actions occur; people based on their own preferences and interacting with other agents try to modify the structural conditions (T2-T3 or social interaction); Finally, it cannot be regarded as a new environment though the structure has already been altered by some actors according to their benefits, using their ability and accompanied by some concession (Hay, 2002). This process is represented in the position of culture, merely replacing the structure with roles of culture, and Archer has balanced the relation over agency and structure as well as the link about agency and culture.

Although the new explain called 'structural explanation' has emergence after this approach, it can also be considered as a better way to analyse the political reality. This new theory cast a light on the four parts. First of all, it stresses the structure of objective existence like material that cannot be controlled by actor over time; secondly, the idea in their mind or the psychological element is neglected when people make decisions, and structural logic underpins the mode of thinking; moreover, there are a number of opinion about the structure, but the majority of the opinions are based on causality in the structure, such as Marxists; finally, even if the rationality has a huge influence on the explanation of structure, the former exactly rely deeply on the latter (Parsons, 2007). However, either structural or institutional explanation focuses on a narrow meaning and reduce the scope of the structure, from material to institute.

The morphogenetic approach could be viewed as a better way to practically research and analyse problems and could present a clear linkage about the structural, agent as well as cultural factors. Although this is a dialectical method, there is a drawback that ignores the cycle about the structure and culture (Marsh & Stoker, 2002).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the concepts of 'structure' and 'structuralism' have been provided and the main four different theories about the 'structure' have been analysed in this essay. Compared to the first three methods, the last methods can be regarded as the best one, because it clearly and dialectically values not only the role of structure but also the role of agency. Inevitably, although some critiques are captured in these theories like intentionalism, postmodernism and some structuralists, including the pure structuralism giving actors an extreme expression, the structuration theory which is no instruction about how to do research and morphogenetic approach giving more attention to temporary time, the structuralism is still a crucial way to help students of political science study the political events. The grave concern with structure and agency is still centred on the politics and even human science and this dispute is unavoidable. What should social and political scientists do is not continuing to argue about the structural and the agent which one is more decisive or reach a consensus, instead of searching a theoretical approach to understand how they are related to each other. Therefore, it is noticeable that more research should be done to minimize issues.

References

- [1] M. S. Archer: *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*. (Cambridge University Press, UK 1996).
- [2] A. Giddens: *The Constitution of Society: Outline of The Theory of Structuration*. (Cambridge: Polity, UK 1984).
- [3] C. Hay: *Political Analysis*. (Palgrave, UK 2002).
- [4] S. Halperin, O. Heath: *Political Research: Methods and Practical Skills*. (Oxford University Press, UK 2012).
- [5] D. Howarth: *Theory and Methods in Political Science*. (Palgrave Macmillan, UK 1995).
- [6] D. Layder: *Modern Social Theory: Key Debates and New Directions*. (UCL Press, UK 1997).
- [7] D. Marsh, G. Stoker: *Theory and Methods in Political Science*. (Palgrave Macmillan, UK 2002).
- [8] D. Marsh, G. Stoker: *Theory and Methods in Political Science*. (Macmillan, UK 1995).
- [9] M. Cotton: *Structure, Agency and Post-Fukushima Nuclear Policy: An Alliance-Context-Actantality Model of Political Change*. *Journal of Risk Research*, Vol. 18 (2015) No. 3, p.317–332.
- [10] D. Kavanagh: *Political Science and Political Behaviour*. (Allen & Unwin, UK 1983).
- [11] M. S. Kende: *Shattering the Glass Ceiling: Legal Theory for Attacking Discrimination against Women Partners*. *Hastings Law Journal*, Vol. 46 (1994) No. 1, p.17-84.
- [12] C. Parsons: *How to Map Arguments in Political Science*. (Oxford University Press, UK 2007).
- [13] S. Parsons: *Rational Choice and Politics: A Critical Introduction*. (Continuum, UK 2005).