



## Structural Contexts of Opportunities.

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## Book Reviews

*Structural Contexts of Opportunities*. By Peter M. Blau. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. Pp. xiii + 229. \$32.50.

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This slender volume updates Peter M. Blau's theory of how macrosocial structure influences microprocesses, building on and extending his earlier work (Blau, *Inequality and Heterogeneity* [New York: Free Press, 1977]; Blau and Schwartz, *Cross-Cutting Social Circles* [Orlando, Fla.: Academic Press, 1984]). The central thesis is that population structure, the composition of societies or societal subunits along salient dimensions of social position, governs individuals' life chances by providing opportunities for and imposing constraints on interpersonal relations and social mobility. The first three chapters lay out theory and summarize extant empirical evidence, which largely concerns intergroup relations (residential segregation, intergroup marriage, intergroup conflict). The conceptual foundations are presented in a precise, orderly, and therefore compelling logic that is a pleasure to read, even if much material is familiar to scholars who have read the two earlier books. The four chapters that follow this review and revision of Blau's theory apply the theory to several new phenomena: social mobility, the structure and behavior of formal organizations, social exchange, and the evolution of societies. Since they represent the meat of the book—scientific progress occurs, after all, by applying existing theories to new contexts—I focus on these chapters.

In chapter 4, Blau tackles three issues concerning social stratification. First, he seeks to extend social theorists' explanatory reach to encompass intergenerational moves *within* occupational structures, as well as intergenerational changes *of* occupational structures. Second, he outlines mechanisms linking intra- and intergenerational mobility. Finally, he decomposes mobility into two factors: the existence of opportunities (different stratification systems) and chances for achieving these opportunities (individual differences in social capital). This chapter breathes new life into one of the most important questions addressed by sociologists, namely how individual characteristics and aggregate social structure jointly influence attainment and inequality.

In chapter 5, Blau briefly reviews a variety of topics concerning organizations: the impact of social structure on organizational membership, the reciprocal influences of individuals and the groups to which they belong, differentiation in formal organizations, and forms of control in business

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enterprise, among others. Although he mentions in passing that organizations' structures mediate the impact of broader social structure, these sections are only loosely tied together by reference to large-scale social structure. Clearly, much work remains for organizational sociologists to apply Blau's theoretical perspective to understanding relations within and between organizations. It is puzzling that Blau does not discuss research that has accumulated over the past decade concerning the demographic composition of organizations' workforces (e.g., Jeffrey Pfeffer's "Organizational Demography," in L. Cummings and B. Staw, eds., *Research in Organizational Behavior* [Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1983]). Researchers have examined how organizational demography—the distribution of organizational members along various dimensions of social position—influences a multitude of individual, group, and organizational outcomes.

Chapter 6 focuses on how large-scale structure constrains small-scale exchange relations. Here, Blau argues that macrostructures (societal, community) do not arise from microrelations (interpersonal, intergroup), but, in a seeming contradiction, he acknowledges that the interactions of individuals and small groups can alter future macrostructure (p. 151). This suggests a nonrecursive dynamic system, wherein past macrostructure influences current microstructure, which in turn influences future macrostructure. If this is a valid reflection of social-structural dynamics, then the question of which came first, micro- or macrostructure, would be rendered obsolete. Social theorists on both sides of the debate could turn to more productive questions, such as their reciprocal influences, and thereby gain greater understanding of what drives stability and change in social systems.

Finally, in chapter 7, Blau examines two antecedents of social structure: demographic trends (differential fertility, mortality, and migration rates) and economic development (industrialization). This chapter takes a perspective on societal evolution that stretches to the very long term, which is congruent with Braudel's argument (*On History* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980]) that knowledge of *l'histoire de la longue durée* is essential to understanding society and that the history of instants and events—*l'histoire événementielle*—may be necessary, but is not sufficient. Blau leaves open the question of the extent to which structures erected in the past become stable elements for many generations, the extent to which "they get in the way of history, hinder its flow, and in hindering it shape it" (Braudel, p. 31).

Social scientists of many different stripes will find the ideas contained in this book extremely useful. Economists will find here a well constructed model of structures within which exchange relations are embedded, a model that transcends the usual categories of monopoly, oligopoly, and perfect competition. Among psychologists, behavioral decision theorists may come to appreciate the external conditions that simultaneously create opportunities for and constrain individual choice and action. Economic and social historians will find a conception of social structure that is amenable to cliometric analyses. Anthropologists will discover

structural explanations that compete with and complement their cultural theories. Sociologists, of course, have the most to gain from applying Blau's theory to pressing questions, such as how various levels of social structure interpenetrate one another.

*The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States.* By Edward O. Laumann, John H. Gagnon, Robert T. Michael, and Stuart Michaels. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. Pp. xxxi + 718. \$49.95.

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This book stakes its claim to fame as the only comprehensive study of adult sexual behavior in the United States that is based on a representative sample. Other studies have not been based on national samples, or have not been based on modern statistical sampling techniques, or have not included both sexes or all ages, and so on. (The study's subjects were 18–59 years old.) The most famous previous studies are those by Kinsey et al. (Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* [Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948]; Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, Clyde E. Martin, and Paul H. Gebhard, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* [Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1953]), which are based on interviews taken in the late 1930s and 1940s. The Kinsey studies drew volunteer samples and therefore could not accurately estimate the behavior of the American population at that time.

This book's title affirms its resolutely social constructionist theoretical stance. Human sexual behavior and its patterns are construed as social inventions. When a pattern of behavior is discovered, the explanation is sociological. For example, when the data show that women report having orgasm infrequently, compared to men, Laumann et al. explain that "orgasm among women is a form of experience that is poorly taught and has limited sources of social support" (p. 113). Lucky for the human race that at least male orgasm is well taught and has solid sources of social support.

Three theories are said to drive the collection and interpretation of the data: script theory, choice theory, and network theory. Script theory says that we share a set of culture-specific conventions about what is sexual, what we do and with whom, where we do it, and in what order. Choice theory is an economic model of decision making applied to how we make sexual choices within the context of existing scripts. Network theory explains how the way we are socially situated in relation to other people affects the sexual partnership formation pattern and its consequences. These theories are contrasted with the theoretical framework of the Kinsey monographs, which conceptualized sexual behavior as a manifestation of biological sex drive. For reasons that escape me, the authors