Social Geography, Spatial Structure and Social Structure

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Abstract: This paper adopts a positivist approach to social geography, which is viewed as a study of the two-way relationship between spatial structure and social structure. This relationship is examined in cities in contemporary Britain and the United States. The concept of social structure is discussed in the first section. It is suggested, after Blau, that social structure may be delineated by parameters which demarcate the lines of differentiation among people, created in their social interaction. Area of residence may be considered such a parameter. Social structure comprises a complex configuration of these parameters. In general, coinciding parameters limit social mobility and lead to an atomised society. The processes by which social structure takes on spatial expression are discussed in the second section. The salience of various parameters of social structure in a spatial setting is assessed first. Behaviouralist, managerialist and structuralist approaches to residential differentiation are reviewed. It is argued that most insight will come from studies of the interaction between groups of households and the major institutions of the housing market in the context of characteristics of the housing supply. The impact of neighbourhood on social structure is examined in the third section. The role of propinquity in social interaction is discussed along with the role of neighbourhood as a status symbol. Individuals may change their position along structural parameters as a consequence of their residential location. Residential segregation is also a means, through its role in circumscribing contacts, by which the continuation of the stratification system is ensured in the next generation. In conclusion, it is noted that the isolation of racial minorities in the disadvantaged parts of the city poses a danger to social stability.

Social geography has neither a unified conceptual framework nor an agreed content. There is even disagreement on the order of sub-division it represents in a classification of geography. Buttimer's (1968, p. 134) description of social geography as "a field created and cultivated by a number of scholars rather than an academic discipline" is as accurate today as when it was written fifteen years ago. This paper presents the views of one cultivator. No attempt is made either to argue this view of the subject against those of other scholars, or to erect a field boundary between the proper concerns of the sociologist and of the geographer in the manner of Schnore (1961). This positivist social geographer, who was trained in the mid-1960s and was heavily influenced by the spatial analytic paradigm, is primarily concerned in his teaching and research to elucidate the relationship between spatial structure (the distribution of social groups) and social structure. This is a two-way relationship. First, spatial structure is largely a reflection of aspects of social structure, and it is incumbent on the social geographer to investigate the processes whereby social structure takes on spatial expression. Second, spatial structure acts to reinforce, and to influence the evolution of social structure. The paper is comprised of three parts, with consideration of these two
key issues being prefaced by a discussion of the concept of social structure. Discussion focuses on the urban setting where spatial structures are more sharply differentiated.

Social Structure

More print has probably been devoted to discussion of the concept of social structure in the sociological literature than to the definition of social geography in the geographical literature. An uncontested definition of social structure would be so general as to be almost meaningless. Udy (1968) suggests that one or more of five components may be recognized — individual, group, morphological, systemic and cultural — which are given different emphases according to the philosophical and theoretical viewpoint of the scholar. However, there are two conceptions of social structure that are generically different. The first, associated with Radcliffe-Brown (1940), holds that social structure is a system of social relations among differentiated parts of a collectivity. The second perspective sees social structure as a system of logical relationships among general principles which is designed as a theoretical interpretation of social life. In this view, "the term social structure has nothing to do with empirical reality but with models built after it" (Levi-Strauss, 1963, p. 322).

Social structure is used here in the first sense as referring to the differentiated, inter-related parts of a society or group. It may be defined as a set of persistent, patterned social relationships between groups of people in different social positions. It must be emphasised that this is a restrictive definition, which emphasises the group element to the exclusion of relationships between institutions. Social structure, as defined, describes observable conditions. Most social theories seek to explain this structure by reference to technological, economic, cultural and psychological factors. Thus, for example, Marx explains the class structure and class conflict on the basis of the dialectical interplay of productive forces with productive relations. Parsons explains social relations in terms of value orientations which he acknowledges makes him a "cultural determinist" (Parsons 1966, p. 113).

This essay draws heavily on Blau’s (1974, 1977) conceptualization. He argues social structure may be delineated by parameters which demarcate the lines of differentiation among people created in their social interaction. Social structure comprises a complex configuration of these parameters, which he suggests should be kept analytically distinct prior to an attempt at synthesis. He distinguishes two types of parameter. Nominal parameters, which engender heterogeneity in a community, divide the population into sub-groups with distinct boundaries but without an inherent rank-order. Sex, race, religion and, critically from the present perspective, area of residence are examples of nominal parameters. Graduated parameters, which differentiate people in terms of a continuous status scale, engender inequality. Income, wealth, education and power are examples of graduated parameters. Social interaction is expected to be greater within groups than between them in the case of nominal parameters; it is expected to be inversely related to the status distance between persons in the case of graduated parameters. Substantial correlation of nominal with graduated parameters forms the basis of what Blau terms ordinal parameters, which divide people into groups with distinct boundaries that are ordered in a hierarchy of ranks. Thus, for example, Duncan (1961) has created an index of occupational status by ranking occupational groups by the education and income of their members. When the hierarchically ranked groups exhibit little overlap in status and there is minimal intergroup interaction, an ordinal parameter may delineate quasi-castes. Blau suggests blacks and whites are quasi-castes because racial differences in the United States and United Kingdom are closely associated with differences in power, prestige, income and education.

Individuals become integrated in groups through processes of recurrent social interaction and communication. Blau maintains that these groups and their members become integrated in the larger social structure because, provided the parameters intersect, every person belongs to a variety of groups and has multiple roles. Ingroup relations along some lines are necessarily accompanied by intergroup relationships along other lines. For example, a manager and an unskilled worker may be members of the same residents’ association but face one another across the negotiating table representing management and union. In contrast, coinciding parameters lead to an atomised society because ingroup preferences become cumulative, and contact is restricted within groups that share the same affiliations.

The inter-relation of parameters also has significance for social change. Social mobility between groups has profound implications for social structure since it changes the distribution of people among social positions. For example, it is generally agreed that there are three essential conditions for the maintenance of a class system in society — class cohesiveness, the individuals’ awareness of belonging to a class, and the self-consciousness of classes. These will be undermined if there is substantial intergenerational social mobility and marriage between classes. Blau argues that in general social mobility between positions is greatest when structural parameters are weakly correlated since this attenuates ingroup relations and intensifies intergroup interactions. Conflict is also dissipated since most individuals are members of many different groups and have conflicting loyalties. This in turn opens channels of communication, so that compromises are possible when conflict threatens. In contrast, structural consolidation, particularly of graduated parameters such as power, prestige, training and skill, reinforces the social barriers between groups, and forces individuals to turn within their own groups for social sup-