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Blau, Peter (1918–2002)

Omar Lizardo

Peter Blau is one of the most influential figures in post-war American sociology. His long career and range of substantive interests span the range from small-groups and social exchange theory to organizational theory, the analysis of status attainment, and finally general sociological theory. One significant legacy is his macrostructural theory, or as he referred to it in his landmark book *Inequality and Heterogeneity* (1977), his “primitive theory of social structure.”

Blau began his sociological training with a Parsonian interest in broad theoretical systems. However, his orientation toward theory was significantly transformed during the course of his training at Columbia University under the tutelage of Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton. From Merton and Lazarsfeld he developed a concern with the measurement of abstract concepts and their connection to theory. Blau is sometimes considered the last great “grand theorist” of twentieth-century American sociology. His notion of grand theoretical sociology as primarily a general, explanatory, and empirical form of doing science continues to form the core of mainstream sociological theory and research into the twenty-first century.

In spite of its apparent “heterogeneity,” it can be argued that a single strand runs through Blau’s diverse body of work. For Blau, the

study of the structural limits posed by large-scale distributions of actors, positions, and resources on the opportunities and choices of individuals constituted the central subject matter of sociology. Nevertheless Blau made seminal contributions to many sociological fields. His life’s work can be divided into four major components: status attainment, his work on organizations, his exchange theory, and his macrostructural theory.

STATUS ATTAINMENT AND MOBILITY

Blau and Duncan’s classic monograph *The American Occupational Structure* (1967) introduced to a sociological audience multiple regression and path analysis, which is today the bread and butter of quantitative sociology. Blau himself seems to have considered this focus to be only a peripheral afterthought in the context of his other work. In a later recollection he noted that he was urged to undertake a large-scale study of mobility in the American occupational structure since in 1950 none yet existed. He enlisted the help of the legendary Otis Dudley Duncan because he considered his own experience with quantitative analysis inadequate. The book remains a landmark mainly because of its quantitative innovations. Most of its admittedly overly optimistic substantive conclusions regarding a future of increasing mobility and decline of ascription have since then come under criticism.

ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY

Blau’s first major contributions to sociology were in the field of organizations. His first major publication – an elaboration of his dissertation research – was *Dynamics of Bureaucracy* (1955), which at the time formed part of a rising post-Weberian wave of organizational studies. This research consisted in exploring how far the received image of the Weberian bureaucracy as an efficient, mechanical system of roles, positions, and duties held up under close scrutiny in the empirical study of social interaction within organizations. Blau (1955) contributed to this strand of research

by highlighting the ways in which the real life of the organization was structured along informal channels of interaction and socio-emotional exchange, and how the incipient status systems formed through these back-channels were as important to the continued functioning of these organizations as the formal status structure. Thus, Blau was primarily concerned with the interplay between formal structure, informal practices, and bureaucratic pressures and how these processes affect organizational change.

Blau's second major contribution to organizational analysis centered on the study of the determinants of the "bureaucratic components" of organizations. He collected data on 53 Employment Security Agencies in the US and 1,201 local offices. The major outcome of this work was Blau's (1970) general theory of differentiation in organizations. This article had an immediate impact in the field of organizations in particular and in American sociology in general. It featured for the first time what would become Blau's characteristic style of deductive theorizing. Blau derived several useful generalizations, the most important of which are (1) increasing size results in an increase in the number of distinct positions (differentiation) in an organization at a decreasing rate, and (2) as size increases the administrative component (personnel not directly engaged in production but in coordination) decreases. This article generated a flurry of research attempts to further formalize, test, and qualify the theory. Most of these studies (primarily by Bruce Mayhew and his students) supported Blau's generalizations.

Because organizational theory in sociology moved away from nomothetic generalizations about determinants of intra-organizational structure and to the study of organizational environments, Blau's article only had a brief influence on organizational research. However, as an exemplar of how to do research and how to build theory, and as a way of showing that general and fruitful deductive theory was possible in sociology, Blau's article (and his later macrostructural theory) deeply influenced a generation of researchers. Because Blau's formal style of theorizing was naturally compatible with attempts at mathematical formalization (and both his organizational and later his macrostructural theory were indeed formalized

by mathematical sociologists such as Norman Hummon, Thomas Fararo, and John Skvoretz), it can be said that Blau's work at this stage constituted an important impetus for the development of mathematical sociology as a coherent and productive subfield in American sociology.

EXCHANGE THEORY AND SMALL GROUP BEHAVIOR

From his original study of social activity in bureaucracies, Blau developed a "microstructural" theory of exchange and social integration in small groups (Blau 1960b). His work on this type of non-economic exchange and its interaction with the status and power structure of the group (flows of advice, esteem, and reputation) would later become important in the influential formalization of exchange theory in the hands of Richard Emerson. To this day Blau is seen in social psychology (along with George Homans) as one of the intellectual progenitors of modern exchange theory in structural social psychology.

While this strand of Blau's work may appear anomalous from the point of view of his later focus on macrostructure, it is important not to be misled by the issue of scale (micro versus macro). Even at this early stage Blau showed a predilection for a distinctive style of Durkheimian explanation, in which individual-level outcomes in small groups (competitiveness, cooperativeness, orientation toward peers and clients, etc.) were seen as at least partly derivable from "structural effects" (Blau 1960a) associated with the overall distribution of these qualities in the group, and with the position of the individual in the network of relations of the group.

MACROSTRUCTURAL THEORY

For Blau (1977), social structure consisted of the networks of social relations that organize patterns of interaction across different social positions. This view of social structure was faithful to Radcliffe-Brown's definition of social structure as the network of actually existing relations that connects human beings in a society. Blau broke with Radcliffe-Brown on

how he conceptualized the components of social structure. For Blau, the basic components of social structure were not natural persons, but instead social positions. Thus, the “parts” of social structure are classes of people like men and women, rich and poor, etc. The relations between these components are none other than the actual network connections that may (or may not) obtain between members of different positions.

Blau thought that the genesis of social structure can be found whenever an undifferentiated group begins to array itself along some socially relevant distinction. In Blau’s view, to speak of social structure is to speak of differentiation among people. By a socially relevant distinction, Blau means a social distinction along some distinguishable social characteristic (age, race, sex, religion, ethnicity, etc.) which comes to determine who interacts with whom. Blau used the term parameter of social structure to refer to socially relevant positions along which people could be classified. For Blau, a particular criterion of classification was not a parameter if it did not actually affect the real social relations of individuals “on the ground.”

In Blau’s (1974) view, two major classes of parameters could be distinguished: graduated and nominal. Modern society was characterized, following an insight of Simmel’s, by the fact that they were composed of (1) a multiplicity of socially relevant positions and (2) that these positions were connected to one another in complex and sometimes mutually contradictory ways, resulting in cross-cutting social circles. Two positions are connected in a mutually contradictory manner if increasing interaction along one distinction leads to decreasing interaction on another. Positions may also be connected in a mutually reinforcing way, whenever interaction along one distinction increases the chances of connecting along some other distinction.

For Blau, one important consequence for rates of intergroup interaction follows from the distribution of people across social positions. The heterogeneity theorem states that increasing heterogeneity across any given dimension of association (more even distribution of people along the “slots” that define a given parameter, such as years of education) increases the probability of intergroup relations.

Thus, in a hypothetical society in which 90 percent of the population has 20 years of education and the other 10 percent has 6 years of education, we should expect less intergroup relations along the education dimension in a society in which people are evenly distributed across this dimension even when holding constant the individual preferences to associate with people of the same educational level. Thus, the lower or higher levels of intergroup contact caused by the distribution of people across positions is a “structural effect” (Blau 1960a) separable from individual-level attributes.

The theory was put to empirical test by Blau and Schwartz (1984), where many of the propositions of the theory found verification with data on rates of intermarriage among different groups in SMSAs in the US. The theory was refined and restated one last time by Blau (1994). At the later stages of his career, Blau attempted partially to reformulate some of the areas of research that he had touched on earlier (such as social exchange, mobility, and organization processes) in terms of his later macrostructural framework. This effort, however, remained partial at best, and met with some empirical disconfirmation. Therefore, a complete macrostructural theory remained outside Blau’s grasp.

However, Blau’s legacy lives on: his idea of social structure as the distribution of individuals along a multidimensional space (Blau 1977; Blau & Schwartz 1984) has become the central element of McPherson’s “structural-ecological” general theory of affiliation, where this multidimensional social space has been rebaptized as Blau Space in his honor. Fararo and Skvoretz have been able to formalize Blau’s ideas regarding different interaction probabilities given different distributions of people across social positions and different levels of in-group and out-group preferences, showing it to be formally compatible with Granovetter’s strength of weak-ties principle. In this and many other ways, Blau’s foundational ideas continue to be the impetus for theoretical development and innovation in contemporary social science.

SEE ALSO: Exchange Network Theory; Merton, Robert K.; Organization Theory; Organizations as Social Structures; Simmel, Georg; Social Exchange Theory; Social Structure

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blockbusting

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Real estate blockbusting, pervasive in many American cities in the post-World War II period, is the intentional action of a real estate broker to place an African American resident in a previously all-white neighborhood for the express purpose of the excessive profit to be made by panicking whites into selling low, then in turn charging marked-up prices to incoming minority residents (Helper 1969). The Civil Rights Act (Fair Housing Act) of 1968 declared it an illegal practice “for profit, to induce or attempt to induce” sales and rentals “by representations regarding the entry or prospective entry into the neighborhood of [a] person or persons of a particular race, color, religion, etc.” (Section 804 [e]). The 1968 Act, which declared discrimination in residential sales,

rentals, or loans illegal, specifically outlawed blockbusting and indirectly barred other discriminatory real estate practices, including steering and redlining.

Rigid adherence to residential segregation designed to maintain a racially separated (dual) housing market paradoxically enabled blockbusting to flourish under certain circumstances. Typically, blockbusters preyed upon the racial prejudices and fears of white residents in segregated neighborhoods by selling or renting to African Americans – or even by spreading rumors of black settlement – to panic property owners unwilling to accept residential integration. Such actions, sometimes referred to as “panic selling” or “panic peddling,” severely depressed housing values, enabling the operators to purchase houses well below prior market value. As whites succumbed to blockbusters’ tactics, “white flight” often ensued, further depressing the prices they were willing to accept. In turn, blockbusters sold the properties to African American home-seekers, previously denied such residential options within the rigid confines of housing segregation, at markups considerably in excess of normal business margins. The profit from such transactions, which could be considerable, was sometimes referred to as “the color tax” or “black tax,” the price African Americans had to pay to gain new housing opportunity. Since prospective African American home buyers often lacked access to conventional financing due to discrimination from mainstream financial organizations, blockbusters also often profited from loan arrangements, including second mortgages and land contracts, which protected their investment but left purchasers exposed to considerable risk.

In the first decades of the twentieth century the growth of African American populations in urban centers as part of the First Great Migration led to early variations by real estate agents dubbed “white blockbusters.” Focusing their activities on the margins of formative urban ghettos, these operators recognized the profit to be made in tenement districts like New York’s Harlem or Chicago’s South Side, where housing values were depressed, of introducing African American tenants, who had little choice historically but to pay substantially higher rents than whites (Osofsky 1963; Philpott 1978).