
RE-CONCEPTUALIZING ABSTRACT CONCEPTUALIZATION IN SOCIAL THEORY: THE CASE OF THE 'STRUCTURE' CONCEPT¹

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Abstract

In this paper, I draw on recent research on the radically embodied and perceptual bases of conceptualization in linguistics and cognitive science to develop a new way of reading and evaluating abstract concepts in social theory. I call this approach *Sociological Idea Analysis*. I argue that, in contrast to the traditional view of abstract concepts, which conceives them as amodal “presuppositions” removed from experience, abstract concepts are irreducibly grounded in experience and partake of non-negotiable perceptual-symbolic features from which a non-propositional “logic” naturally follows. This implies that uncovering the imagistic bases of allegedly abstract notions should be a key part of theoretical evaluation of concepts in social theory. I provide a case study of the general category of “structure” in the social and human sciences to demonstrate the analytic utility of the approach.

Keywords: Abstract Concepts, Social Theory, Image-Schema, Social Structure, Structuralism, Giddens.

1 INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I draw on recent research on the radically embodied nature of concepts (e.g. Barsalou 1999, 2003; Lakoff and Johnson 1999, Gallese and Lakoff 2005) to develop a new way of analyzing and evaluating abstract conceptualization in social theory. I refer to this way of “reading” theory—borrowing from Lakoff and Johnson’s work on the cognitive bases of philosophical reasoning (Lakoff and Johnson 1999)—as *Sociological Idea Analysis* (SIA).

The SIA approach breaks with the taken-for-granted common wisdom regarding the nature of abstract conceptualization shared by most contemporary social theorists. According to this view, the meaning of theoretical concepts is sentential and non-imagistic, made up—at the most abstract level—of amodal *presuppositions* largely independent from experience (Alexander 1982; Craib 1992: 7).² This implies that in the case of the social theorist engaged in the conceptualization—and public, linguistic exposition of such conceptualizations—of abstract domains such as “society,” “agency” or “structure,” such cognitive structures and operations as idealized cognitive models (Lakoff 1987), embodied experiential gestalts (Johnson 1987; Bourdieu 1990) and metaphorical and metonymic projections from concrete, basic-level domains (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999) play only a limited or secondary role. Typically (as we will see below in the case of Giddens), the theorist *rejects* a given conceptualization precisely because it is judged to be too reliant on “imagery”; thus implying that social science concepts *should not* contain a perceptual or imagistic substrate.

Emergent understandings of conceptualization in cognitive science drastically challenge this view. This research shows that the online construction and understanding of the meaning of abstract conceptualizations requires access to the perceptual and “image-schematic” structure that is constitutive of the concept in question (Barsalou 1999, 2003). Conceptual reasoning about abstract domains is thus *grounded* in perception (Langacker 2008, Barsalou 1999), action-based motor-schemes (Gallese and Lakoff 2005), (basic-level) experience (Rosch 1973, Lakoff 1987), and kinesthetic and proprioceptive schemes rooted in the (lived) body (Johnson 1987) in a non-negotiable way.

This has clear implications for theoretical practice among social theorists. Theory essentially deals with the deployment of abstractions that appear to be removed from

² The “modalities” are the (visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic, etc.) sensori-motor channels through which we gain knowledge of the world. An “amodal” representation is thus one that has been modified (“transduced”) so as to lose any connection with its original sensori-motor memory trace.

direct experience (Alexander 1982). This is where the intuition that lends surface validity to the presuppositional approach to the evaluation of theoretical concepts comes from. But if abstract concepts are irreducibly grounded in experience, then the non-imagistic appearance of abstract theoretical concepts in the social sciences must not be taken at face value. To the extent that the social theorist deals with “abstractions” that seem to go beyond that which is directly experienced, she does so only by structuring her conceptualization of these abstract domains using “analog,” non-propositional conceptual resources (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Barsalou 2003).

As I show in what follows, SIA emerges as a novel strategy for the task of theory evaluation and analysis. With SIA, rather than evaluating theoretical proposals based on their “logical” consistency (e.g. theory as a bundle of propositions), the basic strategy is to uncover the underlying imagistic “logic” of abstract conceptualizations. Theoretical conceptualizations are adequate, insofar as the source experiential domain that provides them with structure reveal a useful facet of the abstract domain that the theorist wishes to conceptualize. The basic proposal is that this non-imagistic “logic” is the one that actually accounts for the inferential potential of a given conceptualization. Theorizing in this sense does not resolve itself into the manipulations of sentential formulations. Instead, what theorists do when they exploit a given “abstract” proposition (e.g. conceptualizing a given empirical object as an instance of “social structure”) is explicit in the inherent imagistic logic of the concept in question.

From this perspective, the rejection of “imagery” as an impediment to abstract thinking in social theory is misguided. The reason for this is that social theory concepts (like all other concepts) are “imagistic” in the aforementioned sense. Accordingly, any attempt to get rid of this essential image-schematic substrate of social scientific concepts is bound to fail. Moreover, because the non-propositional logic of concepts operates in the “cognitive unconscious” of the theorist, widespread ignorance of the underlying imagistic substrate of abstract concepts typically renders the theorist a prisoner of her own (metaphorical) constructions (Turner 2010: 95).

The most obvious advantage of SIA is that it renders explicit what in standard approaches to theoretical evaluation remains implicit: namely, the “backstage cognition” that every theorist needs to rely on when generating workable conceptualizations of abstract domains. From this perspective, revealing the experientially grounded nature of the abstract conceptions of social theory emerges as an important adjunct to the theoretical evaluation of sociological concepts, and a key input in the pragmatic decision as to whether these concepts are useful or not. The main goal of this paper is to provide a (small) first step in this direction by demonstrating the utility of the SIA approach for the clarification of the fate of the concept of “structure” in post-functionalist social theory.

The payoff is that the sources and consequences of a lot of problems, inconsistencies, and contradictions in the historical usage of the structure concept can be understood and properly contextualized.

1.1 CASE STUDY: THE CONCEPT OF STRUCTURE IN THE THEORY OF STRUCTURATION

I use the concept of structure—primarily as developed in Anthony Giddens’ “theory of structuration”—as my primary case throughout. I do this for several reasons: first, the concept of “structure” is one of the foundational abstractions in the history of social theory. Since it began to be used as a stand-in for the notion of “social organization” the concept has bedeviled commentators who have noted with despair both its apparent indispensability and the utter impossibility to provide a workable, precise “definition.” It can be said that without exaggeration that this is the most important concept in social theory (Giddens 1979; Thompson 1989; Popora 1989; Elder-Vass 2008). Second, Giddens’ attempt to build and conceptualize a workable notion of structure in the social sciences has been tremendously influential, whether it is direct or “mediated” by both critical and sympathetic commentators (Archer 1982; Popora 1989; Thompson 1989; Sewell 1992; Elder-Vass 2008). Thus, I aim to both contribute to the literature on structure while at the same time showing the limitations of the standard “propositional” approach to the evaluation of theories that put this abstraction at the center of their contribution. Third, we will see that the concept of structure is a *strategic research site* from the point of view of the approach offered here. This is because it was Giddens’ key motivation to move beyond an imagistic understanding of structure and towards a “non-imagistic” conceptualization of the concept. His failure is therefore particularly instructive, since it can be taken as evidence that the grounding of concepts in perceptual gestalts cannot be transcended via the standard propositional route. Finally, I choose Anthony Giddens’ programmatic rework of the structure concept because it is a case with which I can claim some level of non-trivial familiarity. However, I hope can be appreciated below (since in dealing with a thinker as ecumenical as Giddens one must perforce deal with a wide range of other thinkers), other cases can also be dealt with in a way that is similar to the one that I propose.

2 ‘STRUCTURE’ IN SOCIAL THEORY: TWO BASIC MODELS

2.1 STRUCTURE AS BOTH ‘THING’ AND ‘PATTERN’: THE ORGANICIST METAPHOR

Giddens begins by motivating his intervention with the observation that there have been two major ways of conceiving of the notion of structure in the history of social theory (1984: 16-17; 1979: 59-60). The first harks back to the functionalist distinction between “structure” and “function,” owing its origins to the metaphor SOCIETY IS AN

ORGANISM popular among 19th century writers (see Levine 1995) including, most notably, Spencer and Durkheim (Giddens 1979: 60).³ This way of conceptualizing structure implies “some kind of ‘patterning’ of social relations or social phenomena” (Giddens 1984: 16). Giddens criticizes this *organicist* construal of the notion of structure because it evokes “*visual imagery*, akin to the skeleton or morphology of an organism or the girders of a building.” Giddens obviously sees the “imagistic” residue behind the organicist construal of the structure concept as a *deficiency*. He disparages the organicist “image” of structure because it reduces structure to being “...basically a *descriptive* [e.g. not explanatory] term employed by *analogy* with anatomy...” (1979: 23, italics mine); it is essentially a series of obsolete “fairly bluntly expressed *analogies*” (1979: 60, italics mine). Giddens derision of “imagery” and “analogy” as constituting a limitation of theoretical conceptualization that must be transcended is not an idiosyncratic quirk; instead this attitude is symptomatic of the taken-for-granted status of the propositional approach to theory building in social theory.

2.2 A NON-IMAGISTIC NOTION OF STRUCTURE?

Giddens key conceptual move is to contrast the organicist conception of structure, with one that he believes is not burdened with the same “imagistic” defects: structure as “conceptualized in [French] structuralist and post-structuralist thought.” According to Giddens, in French structuralism the concept of structure is presumably rendered free of imagistic metaphorical baggage; which means that this tradition affords for the first time the opportunity to use the notion in an “explanatory” way. This contrasts to the primarily “descriptive” use of the notion of structure in functionalism. In French structuralism, rather than speaking of structure as *visible* “pattern” or “organization” structure results from the interplay of *presence* and *absence* (1984: 16, 78, 181). Here observable patterns are seen as the *surface* manifestation (or empirical realization) of an *invisible* underlying code. This code is non-imagistic and “abstract” and is presumably amenable for reconstruction by the analyst (1984: 33).

Giddens believed that by turning to this alternative (and presumably non-metaphorical) notion of structure he could “clean up” the concept by finally ridding it of its imagistic connotations. The organicist conceptualization can then be relegated to the category of “system,” allowing the analyst to use the notion of “structure” in a strictly non-organicist sense. It is worth noting that contemporary theorists (e.g. Fararo and Butts

³ In this paper I follow standard convention in writings on cognitive semantics (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999, Lakoff 1987, Johnson 1987) by rendering both conventional metaphors and names for image-schemas in all capital letters.

1999) continue to follow Giddens in taking this distinction to be a fundamental point of departure.⁴

Giddens basic goal in his earlier work (1979) and in *The Constitution of Society* (1984) consisted in trying to *integrate* the (functionalist) intuition that structure consists of concrete *patterns* of interaction among elements in a system with the (then innovative but now commonplace) notion that structure had less to do with concrete substances, presences or properties of entities or actors and more to do with (invisible) relational systems for the organization of difference. In what follows, I show that a lot of the “incoherence” of Giddens project that has been noted by some commentators—(e.g. Archer 1982; Thompson 1989)—comes not necessarily from any misunderstandings of the basic theoretical claims either of these—before then never joined in any systematic fashion—*theoretical projects*. Instead, this incoherence arises from ignoring the cognitive constraints that come from our dependence on basic image-schemas for our *conceptualization* of structure.

These constraints dictate that these two notions cannot be coherently “integrated” or “blended” into a single workable hybrid notion. Giddens, in attempting to “join” or “integrate” sociological structuralism with linguistic/mathematical structuralism, was trying to square the circle (in that respect, Levi-Strauss’ (1963), gut instinct that they needed to be kept separate was actually on the right track). These divergent ways of conceptualizing patterned arrangements of elements are not capable of being “integrated” at a conceptual level. Any claim to have integrated them—as is clear from a close reading of *Central Problems* and *Constitution*—depends on propositional sleight of hand. As we will see, the reason why they cannot be integrated is not as obscure as is suggested by the secondary commentary: they rely on ultimately incompatible underlying perceptual gestalt structures for their conceptualization of “pattern,” “elements” and “relation.”

In the next section, I provide empirical support this claim by engaging in a SIA of the organicist and semiotic concepts of structure. I begin by delineating a basic characterization based on the concept of “image-schema” taken from cognitive linguistics (Kimmel 2005) and cognitive semantics (Lakoff 1987; Johnson 1987), which will be my primary analytic tool. I show that both notions of structure (the organicist and the

⁴ Giddens adapts the semiotic distinction between a syntagmatic (temporally extended and spatially bounded) dimension “involving the reproduction of situated practices” and a ‘paradigmatic’ (involving an analytic bracketing of space and time) dimension “involving a *virtual order* of ‘modes of structuring’ recursively implicated in such reproduction” (Giddens 1984: 17, italics added).

“French”) are made up of an integrated set of image-schematic and perceptual-symbolic primitives that lend each of them their distinctive (non-propositional) inferential affordances. This explains why they (and only these two) have been such a productive source of insights in the history of social theory. My analysis also reveals a (conceptually coherent) “meta-structuralism” that integrates the two will be forever out of reach.

3 THE CONCEPT OF STRUCTURE IN SOCIAL THEORY: A SOCIOLOGICAL IDEA ANALYSIS

3.1 IMAGE-SCHEMAS AND MODAL SIMULATIONS

I propose that the basic building blocks of abstract conceptualization in social theory are not amodal “presuppositions” *removed from* experience (e.g. Alexander 1982) but modal, experiential grounded “image-schemas” (Lakoff 1987; Johnson 1987) and “perceptual symbols” *grounded in* experience (Barsalou 1999). Image-schemas are perceptual gestalt structures derived from recurrent patterns of bodily (inter)action and perception, which form the basis of high-level conceptualization (abstraction). They are able to do this because they figure as the primary (experience-linked) *source-domain* for all types of metaphorical and analogical mappings. The main empirical claim is that, when it comes to abstract conceptualization, these mappings are *asymmetric*: they allow us to conceptualize and give structure to abstract, non-experiential realms using perceptual, motor and synesthetically grounded cognitive resources but not the reverse (Johnson 1987). These mappings are then recruited to do conceptual work (e.g. theorize about abstract realms) via modal simulations that exploit their inferential potential (Barsalou 1999; 2003).

This is not just an aesthetically pleasing, armchair account of the nature of theoretical conceptualization. A key point to keep in mind is that this view of the relation between image-schemas and theoretical abstractions allows us to make *empirical predictions* as to the typical structure of most abstractions in social theory. The reason for this is that metaphorical mappings that rely on image-schemas are constrained to *preserve* the shared image-schematic structure across the two domains; here the basic experiential domain lends structure to the more abstract experience-distant domain but not vice-versa (Lakoff 1993). Because Image-schemas possess inferential structure functionally and experientially built-into their specific topological configuration, they can serve as the basis for a sort of non-propositional, non-sentential reasoning and logic (Lakoff 1987; Johnson 1987; Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Gallese and Lakoff 2005). This inference-rich imagistic logic I argue, is usually the horse that pulls along the rider of “propositional logic” in social theory. Thus, even when theorists believe that they are building purely objectivist

arguments based on amodal propositions and deductive entailments (in the classical sense) what they are doing is revealing the inherent imagistic logic of their underlying image-schematic conceptualizations of the social world.

Image-schemas have been characterized in the cognitive linguistics literature as basically an open-ended “list” of basic—highly schematized—conceptualizations of recurrent patterns of experience, preserving what is common to all experiences while discarding the idiosyncratic details. These include such recurrent elements as the image-schema for ENTITY, LINK, FORCE, PART-WHOLE and CONTAINMENT (see e.g. Johnson 1987). I will discuss the basic experiential source of each of these image-schemas as I introduce them during the discussion that follows. Finally, it is important to note that both the organicist and the semiotic notions of structure are conceptualized using not a single image-schema, but an *integrated* set of image schemas. In cognitive semantics this is what has been referred to as a *compound image-schema* (CIS) (Kimmel 2005: 289). Compound image-schemas are higher-order gestalt structures formed by the super-imposition, concatenation and online integration of two or more “basic” or “primitive” image-schemas. Compound image-schemas can be static (obtained by super-position and integration) or dynamic (Kimmel 2005: 290-291); these last are obtained by the temporal concatenation of distinct image-schematic configurations (in this paper I will only be dealing with static CISs). Compound image-schemas allow for recursive integration: for instance, a CIS can have other compound image-schemas as its constitutive elements at a “lower” level of organization.

[Figure 1 About Here]

3.2 THE ORGANICIST CIS AS THE PROTOTYPICAL MEANING OF STRUCTURE

Let us begin with the basic image-schema of structure of sociological structuralism (shown in Figure 1) inherited from the organicist tradition. The resemblance between the organicist CIS and the familiar diagram used for the graph-theoretic representation of “social networks” (Wasserman and Faust 1994) is not accidental. In fact, the network tradition can be thought of as the contemporary “offspring” of the line of structuralist thinking that emerges from 19th century organicism. More precisely, contemporary network theory is the (conceptual) heir to the influential interpretation of Durkheim’s functionalism produced by Radcliffe-Brown and the other figures associated with inter-war British Anthropology (Maryanski and Turner 1991).

I argue that the organicist conceptualization of structure as a sort of objective “patterning,” “network,” “system” or “organism” is *prototypical* for the structure concept. The notion of prototypicality should be understood here in the sense acquired in

contemporary theories of categorization in cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics (Lakoff 1987; Rosch 1978; Rosch and Mervis 1981). Prototypical meanings are cognitively privileged in various respects: (a) it is the default “sense” that is invoked by the reader when he or she encounters the term; (b) it is the most readily accessed meaning of the concept for conceptual or pragmatic purposes; (c) it is the one that is easiest to learn and remember; (d) it is the meaning one most closely connected to basic-level experience; and (f) it is the meaning that figures in most metaphorical and metonymic “extensions” of the concept.

Note that, once again, this is an *empirical* and not a speculative claim. This claim can be readily verified by inspecting the way in which the concept has been deployed by most analysts in the history of social theory (I will do a bit of that below). Note also that if the organicist CIS for structure captures the most conventionalized semantic connotations for the concept and is thus prototypical in the aforementioned sense, then alternative conceptualizations of structure (e.g. the semiotic) popular in contemporary social science should be easily derived as “counter-intuitive” but systematic *deviations* from the central organicist sense. In these deviations, certain imagistic components are introduced and other are deleted. This implies that—no matter how esoteric and counter-intuitive—semiotic conceptualizations should retain a Wittgenstenian “family resemblance” to the original organicist CIS. The empirical implication is that in the history of social theory we should find that prototypical extensions of the structure concept should be historically precede non-prototypical extensions.

[Figure 2 About Here]

3.3 THE IMAGISTIC BASES OF THE SEMIOTIC SCHEMA

Recall that Giddens found the notion of structure inherited from French structuralism analytically superior than the older notion inherited from the 19th organicists because the former notion seemed to be free of the “imagistic defect” of the latter (e.g. Giddens 1979: 60). I submit that Giddens was wrong in this presumption. Like anything else that is in principle thinkable by social theorists (or philosophers and mathematicians (Lakoff and Johnson 1999)), the semiotic notion of structure relies on a prototypical image-schematic characterization. To make this point in a concrete way, I will borrow the somewhat whimsical, but highly influential (and I believe illuminating) formulation introduced by one “rogue” French structuralist: Jacques Lacan (1999: 143). According Lacan, the radical Saussurean notion of signification as resulting purely from the virtual interplay of differences between signifiers can be captured by a very concrete perceptual gestalt: the

image of two otherwise identical bathroom doors, except that one is labeled “Ladies” and the other is labeled “Gentlemen” (Figure 2).

In the key passage in the relevant section of the “Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious” essay, Lacan compares his “doors” diagram to Saussure’s original “tree” diagram (depicting the word “tree”—in French—sitting on top of a picture of a tree separated by a thick line or bar).⁵ Thus, it is clear that Lacan meant this diagram to serve as a *substitute* to the original Saussurean schema for signification. Why do we need a substitute? In Lacan’s view, while Saussure’s original diagram provided some adequate intuition of the arbitrariness of the conceptual or psychological meaning of linguistic symbols with respect to the *phonological* pole (the word “arbol” does an equally adequate job of representing the concept of tree for Spanish speakers), it did not do a good job of conveying the more fundamental insight of structural linguistics: the fact that meaning was not a “psychological” entity at all, but a pure impersonal effect produced by the contrast of different signifiers within a linguistic system.

While Lacan went on to offer some shaky speculations about how the roots of signification were connected to the emergence of “sexual difference”, his basic point stands.⁶ Signification (or any other “structural effect” for that matter) within a semiotic frame is produced through the creation of a purely arbitrary system of differences on an initially undifferentiated base. Once the system is set, the elements can only be identified as distinct *relationally* via their contrast to other elements. A door labeled “ladies” would be institutionally meaningless if there did not exist a category of “gentlemen”-labeled doors to contrast it with. I submit that (some version of) Lacan’s diagram is the fundamental schema for the “structuralist” (or semiotic) notion of structure. This notion, while an elaboration of the prototypical organicist conception, is fundamentally different from it and it is incompatible at a direct image-schematic (and perceptual-symbolic) level. I go on to examine in detail the internal structure of each CIS in the next section.

3.4 BASIC PRIMITIVE COMPONENTS OF THE ORGANICIST AND SEMIOTIC CIS FOR STRUCTURE

3.4.1 THE ORGANICIST CIS: ENTITIES AS PARTS CONFIGURED INTO A WHOLE

⁵ Drawing on recent work in cognitive science, it is clear that neither of these are “diagrams” but are in fact *perceptual symbols* in Barsalou’s (1999) sense.

⁶ The conceptual utility of the semiotic CIS has nothing to do with sexual difference (a fact that Lacan appeared to have been well aware of (Abel 1999: 438), as the same “structural effect” can be produced—and was in the Jim Crow South—by labeling the two doors (or two drinking fountains) with designations for “white” and “colored” (Abel 1999).

These are the “components” of the social system, or the “elements” in a social structure. These are arguably the most important components of the schema, since without units or parts, the notion of system—or structure since the two are equivalent in this conceptualization (Giddens 1979: 61-62; Giddens 1982: 32-35)—makes no sense. Components or parts are cognitively represented using the ENTITY image-schema that is used to conceptualize (at a maximally schematic level) a “thing” as a bounded, interconnected region (Langacker 2008: 136). Things need not be “objects” in the prototypical sense; any process or property can be nominalized and treated for conceptual purposes as a “thing.” These “things” can be quantified, assigned properties to and enter into causal and other sorts of relationships with other nominalized entities. This usually happens via what Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 23-29) refer to as “the ontological metaphor” and Langacker (2008: 95) refers to as “conceptual reification.” For instance, we can conceptualize the “cultural system” using the organicist schema when we think of the elements as reified cultural “building blocks,” such as “norms” (Parsons 1951).

A clear implication follows from the central role that “parts” play in the organicist conceptualization of structure: any (coherent) sociological structuralism must perform as an “analytic” structuralism in which the “decomposability” assumption is a fundamental point of departure (Piaget 1970). In essence, there is no sociological structuralism that is based on a construal of structure as a non-decomposable gestalt without any “parts.” As we will see below, this is a basic point of semantic and inferential contrast with the semiotic CIS for structure. The basic experiential resource that we use to conceptualize parts is inherently dependent on our image-schematic notion of “wholes.” Thus, there is (usually) no isolated “part” schema in conceptualizations of structure. Instead the ENTITY image-schema is usually integrated with the PART-WHOLE schema, to produce the notion of a structured whole composed of parts (Elder-Vass 2007).

The experiential validity of the PART-WHOLE schema comes from the fact that we experience our bodies as wholes made out of parts. We also experience most objects that we interact at the “basic level” (e.g. mid-sized objects capable of being directly manipulated) as wholes made of parts. The bodies of other persons and animals are experienced in a similar way. The PART-WHOLE schema has three structural elements: “[a] WHOLE, PARTS, and a CONFIGURATION (Lakoff 1987: 273). The PART-WHOLE schema has a basic logic. First, the PART-WHOLE relation is asymmetric: if A is a PART of B, the B is not a part of A. It is irreflexive, A cannot be a part of A. It also establishes certain non-negotiable dependencies: WHOLES cannot exist without the PARTS also existing; thus if the PARTS are destroyed or eliminated so is the WHOLE. However PARTS can exist without properly constituting a WHOLE just in case they are not arranged in the proper CONFIGURATION (Lakoff 1987: 273).

There is plenty of evidence from the history of social theory pointing to the cognitively indispensable role of some notion of the integrated PART-WHOLE schema. This was evident to both critics and proponents of functionalist sociology alike. For instance, as Gouldner (1973: 191; see also 194-198) perceptively noted, "...the problem of identifying the *interdependent parts*" was one of the main issues in structural theorizing throughout the twentieth century (emphasis mine). The 19th century organicists relied on the SOCIETY IS AN ORGANISM metaphor to realize this mapping. When a particular empirical domain is conceptualized by the analysis as an *instance* of a more schematic conceptualization (such as the one shown in Figure 1), then we say that the schema is *elaborated* by that instance. Thus in the ORGANISM -> SOCIETY metaphorical mapping, the source domain is organs (playing the role of basic PARTS) connected by exchange relations (of energy, matter, fluids, etc.) and the target domain is persons or institutional structures within a social system linked via exchange relations of both "information" (culture) and material products (Durkheim 1973: 96-97).

In 20th century social theory, "the social actor" would become the prototypical PART in organicist structuralism (otherwise known as "structural-functionalism"), mostly thanks to Parsons (1937) influential decision to place the social "actor" and the "unit act" at the center of social theory. After Parsons, the organicist schema would typically be elaborated by specifying it as a "system of (human) actors" (Lockwood 1956: 135). In contemporary "network structuralism" (Fararo and Butts 1999), the parts are conceptualized in the most abstract and *schematic* way possible as the (maximally neutral in terms of underlying ontology and scaling) "nodes" in a social network (this is made possible by the fact that the ENTITY image-schema has minimal initial specification). These could be persons, organizations, countries, or any other physical, institutional or even semantic entity (e.g. a network of concepts). In contemporary discussions of "social-structure" for instance, the same PART-WHOLE schema can be elaborated by using it to conceptualize "mid-range" structures such as organizations or communities, as wholes structured by parts joined in relations and endowed with "emergent" properties (Elder-Vass 2008).

3.4.2 THE ORGANICIST CIS: RELATIONS AS CONNECTORS

The theorist cannot conceive of the notion of system without (at least schematically) conceiving of the elements being somehow connected to another by some sort of LINK and without conceiving of some sort of substance, abstract or concrete, or force being transmitted through those links. This was as much the case in the classical (organicist) structuralism of Durkheim (expressed in words) as it is in the graph-theoretic version of contemporary network structuralism (expressed in matrix algebra) (Wasserman and Faust 1994), the difference being one of schematic *elaboration* not kind.

Relations are an integral component of the organicist CIS for structure because it is through the pattern of relations joining the PARTS that the specific CONFIGURATION them to actually constitute a WHOLE is specified (Elder-Vass 2007, 2008; Porpora 1993). In order to conceptualize the prototypical notion of relation the social theorist must rely on the LINK image-schema. As noted by Johnson (1987: 117) the experiential basis of the LINK schema lies in our ability to hold on to other persons and objects and thus become connected to them. We are also exposed to various ways in which objects come to be tied to one another (e.g. a cart and a horse, a lamp hanging from the ceiling by chain, etc.). Its elements are “Two ENTITIES, <A> and and a LINK connecting them.” The basic logic is as follows: If A is linked to B then A is somehow dependent, constrained by B. If A and B are linked then any change in A’s position is followed by a correlative change in B’s position. Finally, the LINK schema is usually (although not necessarily) symmetric: If A is linked to B, that means that B is linked to A. LINKS can be broken, in which case, A and B are now separate entities (Lakoff 1987: 274).

The LINK image-schema may be used to symbolize any type of concrete juxtaposition, interaction or transfer of energy or force—when joined to a force-dynamic conceptualization (Talmy 1988)—via its integration with the FORCE image schema—from one element to the other. For instance the transfer of “social force” from one element to the other usually is referred to as “influence” within a “social system” [PART-WHOLE]. This directly symbolizes the intuition that a key feature of the organicist schema of structure is the “interdependence” of the parts Giddens (1979: 73). In this sense the notion of one element coming to “affect” or “influence” the other elements of the system is not an extra-theoretical notion imported into the organicist schema, but an integral part of it.

3.4.3 System, Network, Structure

This analysis clarifies an otherwise puzzling feature of writings on sociological structuralism: in spite of the proliferation of different linguistic *terms* to refer to the organicist schema in the history of social theory, there is a single underlying conceptualization uniting seemingly disparate notions of *social* structure, whether as “social system” or “social network.” In this respect, when it comes to the conceptualization of social structure, some version of the organicist PART-WHOLE + ENTITY + LINK CIS appears to be the only game in town.

The conceptualization of social structure as a concrete, observable “network” of “actually existing” *relations* was first made explicit and central to sociological structuralism by Radcliffe-Brown (1940: 2), in his influential (and ultimately canonical) definition of *social* structure as the “concrete pattern” of social relations observable in a given

collectivity. This definition was taken almost without modification by network structuralists in American Sociology such as Blau (1974) and survives to this day almost intact in network structuralism (e.g Wellman 1988). Even though Radcliffe-Brown's definition sounds "abstract" and non-imagistic in his use of such scientific-sounding terms as "pattern" and "network" and his empiricist claim that structures were clearly out there for anybody to see, it is clear that Radcliffe-Brown had to conceptually rely on the organicist analogy for his fundamental conceptualization of structure as a concrete pattern. Thus, the distinction between "structure as an actually existing concrete reality, to be directly observed, and structural form" can be made clearer according to Radcliffe-Brown,

...by a consideration of the continuity of social structure through time, a continuity which is not static like that of a building, but a dynamic continuity, like that of the organic structure of a living body. Throughout the life of an organism its structure is being constantly renewed; and similarly the social life constantly renews the social structure (1940: 4).

The very same fully integrated organicist CIS is *also* the conceptual foundation for the notion of "system" dominant in mid-twentieth century structural functionalism. This analysis explains the (non-propositional) bases of this continuity in spite of various superficial changes in terminology and emphasis. This was clear in Parsons' own (influential) definition of "system" as implying "*a complex of interdependencies [LINK] between parts, components [ENTITY]; and processes that involve [sic] discernible regularities of relationship [LINK/FORCE], and to a similar type of interdependency [LINK/FORCE] between such a concept [PART-WHOLE] and its surrounding environment*" (Parsons 1968: 458, italics mine). Gouldner (1973: 190) shared a similar assessment of the connection between organicism and systems theory. As he pointed out "[t]he recurrent use of organicist models...its major intellectual justification in the fact that organisms are *examples* of systems." To the extent that the organicist model has proved fruitful in sociological analysis it has been so because the organism was a paradigmatic case of a system." In our terms, we can interpret Gouldner's assertion as implying that (individuated) organisms are the *basic level prototype* for the notion of system. A "system" is the abstract *schematic* representation of an organism, which then may be used to characterize any other entity that shares schematic features with organisms (such as boundedness and patterned organization). This also implies that "...the organicist model has been misleading in sociological analysis precisely in so far as it led to a focus on characteristics which were peculiar to the organism but no inherent in the *generalized* [schematic] notion of a 'system'" (Gouldner 1973: 190).

3.4.3 THE SEMIOTIC CIS: THE SUBSTRATE

Figure 2 makes clear why there can be no coherent synthesis between the organicist and semiotic CIS, for the semiotic CIS is not composed of elements (ENTITIES) and relations (LINKS), but instead of a set of markings (TRACES) “written” on an underlying base or substrate (SUBSTANCE).

Let’s begin with the last element. The semiotic schema *requires* some conceptualization of this underlying “substrate” in order for it to do any conceptual work; this base is perceptually and schematically distinct from the primitive “entities” constitutive of the organicist CIS. A lot of ink has been spilled over this issue, especially after so-called “post-structuralist” theorists—inspired by Derrida’s initial salvo (or series thereof) in the essays collected in *Writing and Difference* (1978) —attempted to craft structuralist systems devoid of any substrate whatsoever, resulting in predictable bouts of ontological incoherence. In the original Saussurean formulation, the foundational substrate of signification is psychologically registered “acoustic images” produced through our (physiological) ability to detect phonetic differences in the auditory modality.

In Lacan’s version of the semiotic CIS, the relevant perceptual modality that allows for the structuralist effect is visual but the basic argument is the same; structuralism requires an experiential base from which to operate (although it does not matter whether this base is “material” in the standard physicalist sense of not as long as it can be experienced). In *Of Grammatology* (1976: 11-12 Derrida argues against the “phonocentric” notion of “voice” in order to come up with a modified schema that contains only differences without a base.⁷ This was Derrida’s way of taking to its limiting conclusion Saussure’s (1966: 186) (misguided) claim that “[i]n the language itself, there are only differences...and no positive terms.”⁸

It is clear however, that any attempt to rid the basic schema of its base component run into the limitations on coherence that come from using the perceptually grounded

⁷ Essentially, this would be Figure 2 without any doors, just free floating gender designations; or more accurately, simply the “gap” that separates the doors

⁸ Following this proposal, Butler (1999) has attempted to generate a (post)structuralist schema for gender differences in concrete, embodied (and signifying) practices but without having to rely on a pre-existing materiality (human bodies endowed with their own pre-linguistic efficacy qua bodies) upon which this signifying structure operates. The spirit of her attempt is thoroughly “deconstructionist” in Derrida’s sense, but from the point of view of a grounded approach to meaning and experience, it is thoroughly misguided. Similar attempts to designate structures generative of other types of difference (sexual or racial) have been produced in other fields (most notably—and inspired by Butler) in the field of “Queer studies” and (inspired by Spivak’s re-reading of Derrida) in “post-colonial” studies.

semiotic CIS as the disavowed “substrate” always comes back through back door. The reason for this is not as esoteric as some commentators have implied; in fact it is pretty simple: the substrate is an integral (at the gestalt-perceptual level) component of the semiotic schema and it is necessary for it to part of any coherent perceptual simulation.

3.4.4 THE SEMIOTIC CIS: THE TRACE

That said, the key to the conceptual productivity of the semiotic schema is the creation of an arbitrary *difference* upon the originally undifferentiated SUBSTANCE that constitutes the base. This is done in Figure 2 using the words “ladies” and “gentlemen” although any other perceptible (symbolic or iconic) difference would have also been sufficient. For instance coloring the two doors blue and pink would create the same “structural” effect without the use of words. Levi-Strauss (1963) drew a similar lesson—regarding the primacy of contrasts over the specific substantive properties of the elements that are contrasted—from the formalization of phonological systems as relying on arbitrary distinctions (associated with voicing and positioning) produced by Jakobson and the other members of the “Prague school” of linguistics. This insight became the foundation for his influential analyses of myth and totemism.

Derrida (1976: 41-44), was once again pivotal in realizing that because the provenance and nature of the relevant markings were arbitrary their “substantial” specificity was immaterial. This is why he thought the efficacy and conditions of possibility of signification to reside in the TRACE and why he thought that writing and not speaking was the prototypical structural (and thus signifying) event. “Writing” is conceptualized—in this particular context—by Derrida as abstracting from the basic level (and thus prototypical) physical activity, and should instead be thought of at a maximally schematic level as “creating a mark that makes a difference.” In the prototypical conceptualization, writing is an activity and activities are *conceptually dependent* on agents. In Derrida’s maximal schematization of the process, the agent drops out of the picture producing the cognitively incoherent notion of the “trace”: writing as an activity that does not even require an agent to operate. A better way to think of this is that once the TRACE is made, the signifying operation (e.g. the creation of a difference where there was none to begin with) becomes partially independent of the intention and wishes of agents. This substantiates the intuition that signification within a semiotic frame is independent of the “the subject” and serves as the prototype of those types of social action whose consequences escape the original designs of the agents that produce them coming back to act upon them via pathways not discernible via phenomenological inspection (Giddens 1979).

4 IMPLICATIONS OF THE ANALYSIS

4.1 EXPLAINING THE SEMANTIC CONTRAST AND DIVERGENT INFERENCE POTENTIAL OF THE TWO NOTIONS OF STRUCTURE

This analysis reveals several points of semantic contrast between the organicist and semiotic CIS for structure. Ignoring these differences or trying to paper over them via propositional means will result in nothing but semantic incoherence.

4.1.1 DECOMPOSABILITY VERSUS HOLISM

The organicist CIS is *decomposable*: the parts can be conceived independently of the relations that they enter into. The semiotic CIS is *non-decomposable*, because it lacks independent “parts.” This implies that *analysis* (e.g. analytic structuralism or “analytic sociology”) is a theoretical strategy compatible with the organicist CIS, but is foreclosed in the semiotic CIS. From within the semiotic CIS, only a “holist” strategy (in which the entirety of “relations” of contrast and equivalence that determine the identities of the elements in the “system” are enumerated) is applicable (Piaget 1970).

4.1.2 CASUAL VERSUS CONSTITUTIVE POWER OF RELATIONS

In the organicist CIS, the parts have identities and properties *independently* of the relations that they enter into. While these parts may gain *new* properties and identities by virtue of entering into the relations that define “the system,” the parts are not entirely *constituted* by them. In the semiotic CIS, the identity of the elements that play the role of “parts” (e.g. the doors in Figure 2) is *entirely constituted* by their relation. This “downward conflationist” inference is perfectly valid from a semiotic frame, but wreaks analytic havoc (see for instance, Emirbayer 1997) when transferred to an organicist frame. In the organicist CIS, the parts may be causally affected by the whole, by virtue of the fact of entering into a given relational configuration (Elder-Vass 2007); that is, relations may have causal powers (Porpora 1993). The semiotic CIS precludes these inferences. Here, the relations are not concrete and the parts are dependent on the relations (for A to have a causal “effect” on B, A must be distinct from B). Rather than having “causal powers” as traditionally defined, “relations” have *constitutive* powers in the semiotic CIS. This is in many ways a stronger conceptualization of the “power” of relations. This accounts for why certain relationist theorists also see themselves as “breaking” from traditional notions of causality in the social sciences (e.g. Bourdieu 1990; Emirbayer 1997).

4.1.3 CONCEPTUAL INDEPENDENCE VERSUS CONCEPTUAL DEPENDENCE OF THE IDENTITY OF THE ELEMENTS IN THE STRUCTURE

In the organicist CIS, the relations that unite the elements can be conceived in *partial independence* (via conceptual reification) from the elements that they unite. In the semiotic CIS relations have no concrete or independent conceptualization (they are “absent” or “virtual”). As we have seen, the “elements” are related by *difference* not *identity*. In the

semiotic CIS relations are *not* connectors, nor do they afford any sort of inference as to whether the “join” elements or “transmit” substances or abstract forces. Instead, elements emerge when the relation of difference is established; by for instance, creating a mark that makes a difference (TRACE). In the organicist CIS this “constitution” of elements via membership in the system (PART-WHOLE) is of a much weaker nature. For instance, it is clear that the *function* of an element cannot be specified outside of the CONFIGURATION. However, it would be a category mistake to conclude that they would lack *any* identity outside of it.

This inference—perfectly legitimate when it comes to specifying the identities and properties of elements *within the semiotic CIS*—becomes specious when applied to social systems. Theorists who attempt to fuse semiotic and sociological structuralism make this mistake with regularity, and end up becoming caught in irresolvable conceptual dilemmas. The most egregious of these is the illicit *reification* (the fallacy of misplaced concreteness) of what is an abstract property of the structuralist schema, into a concrete *relation* in the model of the image-schematic *connector* of sociological structuralism (e.g. Emirbayer 1997). Thus, while perfectly applicable to “cultural structures,”⁹ the structuralist schema wreaks analytic havoc when applied to Radcliffe-Brownian (organicist) “social structures” (Levi-Strauss 1963).

4.2 EXPLAINING THE HISTORICAL *INDISPENSABILITY* OF THE ORGANICIST SCHEMA

The SIA of the structure concept shows that the fully integrated [PART-WHOLE + CONFIGURATION + LINK/FORCE] organicist CIS is *indispensable* for certain conceptualizations of structure, especially those that qualify this concept as *social structure* (Thompson 1989; Porpora 1989; Elder-Vass 2007). This explains why the neo-organicist (e.g. systems-theoretic) conceptualizations of structure are so seductive in the first place, and why they cannot be simply substituted by a semiotic notion without irremediable conceptual loss.¹⁰ This more than other candidate deficiencies (e.g. the fact that the theory is “elisionist” (Archer 1982)) lie behind the failure of Giddens’ structuration project.

⁹ The (metaphorical) notion of “cultural structure” is productive as long as the theorist understands these to be an abstract analytic construction and not reify as a set of non-material ENTITIES subsisting WITHIN some ethereal—pseudo-organicist!—“cultural system”; since that leads us right back to the unproductive Parsonian formulation.

¹⁰ A particular strength of the approach to theoretical analysis offered here is that it accounts not only for the “confusions” produced by resorting to a given set of conceptualizations, but also why (in some domains) these conceptualizations are almost inescapable, and theorists seem as if they cannot think in any other terms.

Early on, both Thompson (1989: 64-65) and Porpora (1989) pointed to an example of the sort of conceptual loss that I am referring to. For instance, if we were to accept Giddens' semiotic version of the notion of structure then it is simply impossible to map it coherently to what we (prototypically) mean by *social* structure (which is the same thing that was meant by Radcliffe-Brown). This means losing conceptual affordances regarding the analytical independence of structural elements (e.g. social positions) from the relevant CONFIGURATION and the relations that connect them, as well as an inability to properly conceptualize the (efficient) causality of social relations in analytical independence from the activity of persons (Porpora 1989). In this sense, when Giddens abandoned the organicist schema, he *ipso facto* abandoned any hope of providing an adequate conceptualization of *social* structure, although he could still conceptualize structure in the "virtual" (semiotic) sense (Thompson 1989; Archer 1982; Porpora 1989).

4.2 EXPLAINING THE HISTORICAL PRODUCTIVITY OF THE ORGANICIST SCHEMA

The fully integrated [PART-WHOLE + LINK/FORCE + CONTAINMENT] organicist CIS is *productive*. In cognitive semantics a given schematic construction is productive if it can be used for the conceptualization of a wide range of experiential domains; in general the more schematic a given symbolic construction, the more productive it is. It is easy to show that the organicist CIS is productive in this sense. For instance, we can substitute individuals for aggregate parts of society (e.g. institutions) and conceptualize "society" as a macro-system in which institutions are the parts connected by relations of information and personnel exchange (Parsons 1951) (thus dropping the requirement that natural individuals are the privileged parts). This late-Parsonian turn then led analysts to attempt to differentiate "social" from "systems" integration, or as Lockwood (1956) memorably phrased it, to distinguish the *people* from the *parts*.

It is clear however—if we follow Gouldner (1973) and the argument laid out here so far—that whether we think of the people *as* the "parts" is a matter of *construal* (Langacker 2008) (we can think of any element that can be conceptualized as an ENTITY as the parts). This conceptual choice is not dictated by the structure of reality (as presumed by closet-objectivists). Rather, the only relevant constraints are the non-propositional logic of the organicist schema and the theorist's conceptual *choice* to elaborate this schema empirically by filling in his or her preferred entity as the parts.¹¹ Thus the same schema

¹¹ For instance, Porpora (1989: 198-200) derives a conceptualization of social structure using the organicist PART-WHOLE schema, but treats "social positions" (conceived as detachable from natural persons) as the parts united by relations [LINK]. As we will see below, this is indistinguishable at the schematic level from Elder-Vass (2008), who uses the same schema to conceptualize organizations and communities, except that Elder-Vass reinstates persons as the privileged parts.

can be used to conceive of “society as a whole” (as in the now discredited functionalist version) or smaller scale social systems, such as organizations or communities (Elder-Vass 2007). It can even be used to conceptualize “sectors” of society, or even such abstractions as “capitalism” (Porpora 1989: 199).¹²

4.2 EXPLAINING THE INHERENT *INCOMPATIBILITY* BETWEEN CONCRETE AND “VIRTUAL” CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF THE NOTION OF RELATION

The SIA of the structure concept also demonstrates how, in the semiotic CIS, the “relation” between the elements is completely abstract, and in fact it is “invisible” or “virtual”; this contrast semantically with the concreteness of the “connector” characteristic of the organicist CIS. This contrast is specified directly in the fact that in the semiotic CIS the relation is not schematically specified. This analysis clarifies what Giddens had in mind when he noted that “According to the theory of structuration, an understanding of social systems as situated in time-space can be effected by regarding structure as non-temporal and non-spatial...” (1979: 3). And that “...Structure, as recursively organized sets of rules and resources, is out of time and space, save in its instantiations and co-ordination as memory traces and is marked by an ‘absence of the subject’” (1984: 25). The conceptualization of structure as having no extensionality (in either space or time) adduced is claim that has bedeviled commentators (e.g. Archer 1982; Sewell 1992). Some of them have noted with exasperation, that if structure is to be understood as “rules and resources recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems” Giddens (1979: 64), and if “existence” is interpreted in the standard organicist sense, then the claim of virtuality is non-sensical, or at the very least must be heavily qualified. Some analysts have attempted just such a qualification restricting virtual existence only to the “mental” or “cultural” aspects of structure, but keeping it away from “material” resources which are clearly both temporally and spatially extended (Sewell 1992).

These attempts to bring “logical” consistency into the theory of structuration are laudable, but (due to their reliance on closet propositionalism) ultimately quixotic. It is apparent that what Giddens meant to suggest here was that in the semiotic CIS the substantiality of the elements involved is (literally) immaterial: it simply does not *matter* (pun intended) if the doors are real or drawn on paper. It does not even matter if there are doors. They could be books (e.g. novels designated as “chic-lit” versus “serious literature”), or shirts (e.g. gender-coded dress) or ways of standing (Butler 1999). The structural

¹² Note that the semiotic CIS is equally productive. Hierarchical gender, racial and colonial systems can be thought of as sharing a family resemblance (they are all specifications of hierarchical systems sustained by an arbitrary binary code specifying difference).

“effect” (e.g. providing an instantiation of a binary gender classification system) is independent of the substantive constitution of the elements in question (not so in organicism, as the interconnections between two countries is empirically and substantively distinct from that between two individuals; in addition it matters whether two countries are exchanging goods or are exchanging gunfire). Furthermore, the structural effect persists in time (the “relation” that “joins” the two elements is constant and does not need to be “put together” in time). Thus, the (underlying) “structure” appears to be “out of time and space” as suggested by Giddens. The “mistake” therefore, does not lie in Giddens’ conceptualization of the notion of virtuality from *within the constraints of the semiotic CIS*.

The “failure of sense” emerges when Giddens’, having abandoned the classic organicist schema for structure due to its “imagistic” defects, takes empirical phenomena that are most plausibly conceptualized via the organicist schema (e.g. social relations constituted via differential allocation of resources) and attempts to conceptualize them as *elaborations of the abstract semiotic CIS* (Archer 1982; Thompson 1989; Porpora 1989). In the organicist CIS, the constitutive elements are concrete, substantial and would retain partially autonomous identities, properties and capacities even if the linkages (represented by the connectors) were to be removed. In fact the substantiality (and reality) of the elements in the organicist schema precedes their coming together in interaction. Here, the elements and the relations are coded using conceptually autonomous, lower-order image-schematic components: the ENTITY image-schema (a stand in for a bounded region or entity either concrete or abstract) and the “connector” or LINK (a stand in for relation or transfer of force from one bounded region to another). The organicist schema allows for “analytic dualism” in Archer’s sense (the separate conceptualization of the parts and the configuration that generates the whole), something that the semiotic CIS simply does not afford.

5 BEYOND THE STRUCTURATION CASE

5.1 THE CONCEPT OF (SOCIAL) STRUCTURE IN CRITICAL REALISM

As I noted at the outset, I explicitly circumscribed my application of the SIA approach primarily to Giddens’ agenda-setting intervention into the debate over the structure concept. Other authors (e.g. Parsons, Radcliffe-Brown) have been brought to the discussion mostly for purposes of empirical demonstration (e.g. to validate the prototypicality of the organicist schema for structure). This means that I have not touched upon most work on the concept of social structure that post-dates Giddens’ intervention, in particular the various critiques of structuration that have been developed from a *realist* perspective (e.g. Archer 1982, Porpora 1989; Elder Vass 2007, 2008). The reader might

thus be wondering whether I have fit my argument to the case; and whether the SIA approach would run into trouble outside of the context that I chose for illustration.

Fortunately, the question of whether the SIA approach can shed-light on critical-realist approaches to the theory of structure can be answered in straightforward way. Not only can critical realist analyses of the structure concept easily handled from within the SIA approach, but as will become clear, critical-realist conceptualizations of structure actually represent an even easier case for SIA. This is for two reasons. First, because of their emphasis on “ontology” (that is, the most *generalized* [read schematic] level of description) critical realism has unwittingly moved the discussion of structure towards what, from the point of view of SIA is a very productive direction: one that emphasizes the image-schematic features that are responsible for the semantic contrast between different “senses” of the concept of structure and of its constituent elements. This means that critical realist-discussions of the structure concept are even more transparent as to the underlying imagistic bases of the concept than those developed from within the structuration problematic.¹³

Second, in many respects critical-realists rely on a less complex (and thus less confused) notion of structure than Giddens. The reason for this is that critical-realists have been able to advance beyond the aporias that beset Giddens’ project, precisely by (correctly) *retreating* away from Giddens’ doomed attempt to integrate the organicist and semiotic senses of structure. The semiotic schema for structure is not useful for critical-realists for a simple reason: insofar as structure ends up being “virtual” from within this schema, then it does count as “substantial.” An unsubstantial notion of structure is to be rejected because an entity without substance cannot be thought of as “real” in the desired sense (Elder-Vass 2008: 295-296). Critical-realists are instead interested in salvaging a notion of (social) structure that is unproblematically real, substantial, and can be ascribed causal powers and properties; for this the semiotic schema will not do. Accordingly, in most critical-realist writings, structure reappears in its (most coherent) (neo)organicist sense. This should not be surprising; one of the most coherently worked out realist approaches to social structure from within the critical-realist tradition (Margaret Archer’s (1982) “morphogenetic approach”) derives from Buckley’s systems theory and, as we have seen, systems theory is but a schematization of organicism (Gouldner 1973). If this is correct, then we should find that when critical-realists provide abstract

¹³ Where critical-realists fall short is in not recognizing these image-schemas as resources affording conceptualization; instead they are treated (following a rather *uncritical* objectivism) as entities endowed with an unproblematic existence, such that words (e.g. “substance”) are used as if they *refer* to really-existing abstractions (as opposed to being concepts used by the analyst to characterize particulars).

conceptualizations of social structure at the most generalized (ontological) level, they must perforce use the ensemble of image-schemas constitutive of the organicist schema: ENTITY, LINK and PART-WHOLE. Even the most cursory analyses of recent critical-realist discussion of the concept of social structure reveal that they in fact do so with abandon.

5.1.1 STRUCTURE FROM A “MORPHOGENETIC” PERSPECTIVE

Take for instance Elder-Vass’ (2007, 2008) recent attempts to theorize structure from a “morphogenetic” perspective.¹⁴ The key point that I want to emphasize is that in attempting to provide an “emergentist” account of the structure concept, Elder-Vass reasoning is clearly guided by the organicist schema. This is further evidence in favor of the hypothesis that when it comes to conceptualization of *social* structure, this schema (and related variants) is really the only game in town. According to Elder-Vass (2008: 287-288), social structures (such as an organization, a group or a community) have emergent powers because they can be thought of as “wholes” made up of “parts” [PART-WHOLE + CONFIGURATION + ENTITY] arranged in certain “relations” [LINK] with one another. Elder-Vass’ basic argument is that social structures are therefore themselves higher-level “entities” [ENTITY], endowed with “properties” and “causal powers” [FORCE] not possessed by their lower level parts and capable of acting on those constituents. These powers and properties emerge from a generative mechanism that can be located in the specific way in which the relations between the parts are organized (Elder-Vass 2007: 466-467).

While I cannot get into the merits of Elder-Vass’ argument here (it has been criticized for its “holist” connotations), it is clear that from the point of view of SIA, *construing* structures as wholes bearing properties not possessed by the parts and affecting those parts is absolutely unproblematic. In fact, it is one of the main inferences afforded by the organicist schema for structure; and for this reason this is a formulation that has appeared in various guises in the history of structural analysis in the social sciences, and one that is not going away any time soon. As noted above, it is only when we *elaborate* the schema and construe *people* as the PARTS that certain theoretical problems present themselves as issues to be resolved (e.g. social structure as an entity standing above and beyond individuals exercising causal force on them). A different elaboration (construing societal “sectors” as the parts) would lead to a different set of problems (e.g. “systems integration”).

¹⁴ Obviously, I do not believe that Elder Vass represents all critical-realists, since there is a diversity of approaches and perspectives—and debates—within this broad umbrella. However, the analysis would apply to any other author within this tradition. I select Elder Vass because he is able to lay out some of the most basic issues with unusual clarity.

5.1.2 CONCEPTUAL AMBIGUITY IN THE NOTION OF RELATIONS

Another case in point is Elder Vass' (2007: 464) recent attempt to disambiguate different meanings of the term "relation." Drawing on Ollman, Elder Vass differentiates between what he refers to as *relations as wholes* and *relations as connections*. According to Elder Vass (2007: 464), the first sense of relation points to "...an entity, [ENTITY] a whole, that is composed of its parts [PART-WHOLE] plus the *relations* [LINK] (with a small *r*) between them." It is clear that Elder-Vass is once again describing two different image-schematic models for the concept of "relation." As I noted above the virtue of the ontological approach is that it renders explicit the image-schematic structure of a given concept; I did not have to work as hard to point to the linguistic reference to the image-schemas here because Elder-Vass did so explicitly. Nevertheless, *not recognizing* these as the non-propositional substrate of the concepts leads to confusion.

It is clear that Elder Vass is *not* differentiating between to meanings of the concept of *relation*. As we have seen the *prototypical* (grounded) meaning of the concept of relation is given by the connector (LINK) image-schema; this is what Elder Vass is calling the *relations as connections* meaning. In this sense, there is only a single (prototypical) meaning of the notion of relation. The other meaning, *relations as wholes* is clearly not referring to "relations" but to a complex whole composed of parts united by relations; essentially the organicist CIS for structure that we began with! The concept of "relations as wholes" is therefore certainly *not* meant to refer to *relations* in the prototypical sense (which can only be connectors). For one, while the first can be conceptualized via a simple image-schema (LINK, sometimes integrated with FORCE) the second one is clearly a compound image-schema (PART-WHOLE + ENTITY + LINK). The "relations as wholes" meaning is evoked whenever some relational ensemble (or a subset of a larger ensemble) is *construed* by the analyst (for purposes of conceptualization or exposition) as a nominalized "whole" (via conceptual reification and the ontological metaphor) composed of parts; as in "capital is a relation" (Elder Vass 2007: 464, italics added). Inferences are then guided by the relevant CIS, which happens to be the organicist CIS for structure (e.g. capital is conceptualized as a connector yoking together in a bond of mutual dependence [LINK] the two warring elements [ENTITY] of the social totality [PART-WHOLE]: workers and the bourgeoisie). Paying attention to the underlying imagistic substrate allows us not to be misled by the fact that the same phonological form (the word "relation") is being used to evoke these two radically different meanings.

6 CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued that traditional propositional analyses of conceptualization in social theory are limited by their misguided account of the nature of abstract conceptualization. Instead, I proposed that abstract conceptualization in social theory

relies on the deployment of conceptual resources that are grounded in our embodied, experiential reality. This argument is consistent with recent advances in linguistics, psychology and cognitive science regarding the poverty of propositional, amodal models of conceptualization and abstraction (Barsalou 2003). I demonstrated the analytic utility of this approach via a *sociological idea analysis* (SIA) of the notion of “structure” in recent social theory. The SIA explains *why* the inclusion of certain elements into the conceptualization of structure is non-negotiable, and why certain conceptualizations are cognitively privileged (prototypical). It also shows *how* these elements (LINK, FORCE, PART-WHOLE, etc.) are typically integrated in the conceptualization of social structure. Finally, the analysis reveals how the two senses of structure—organicist and semiotic—are made meaningful at the level of modal image-schemas and perceptual symbols while also revealing the source of their semantic contrasts. I show why the two schemas afford different inferences, and why they cannot be coherently integrated into a single scheme.

The SIA strategy offered in this paper can easily be extended to the examination of conceptual issues related to other social-scientific concepts, such as “culture,” “agency,” “power,” or “institutions.” I believe that uncovering the imagistic, embodied and experiential bases of these “theoretical” abstractions will allow us to begin to make some real, discernible progress in adjudicating which variations of which concepts are the most substantively fruitful ones (depending on context) and which ones should be discarded as unworkable. This project will also help us to remove the hint of arbitrariness that usually accompanies theory building in social science when this is done within the auspices of closet-objectivism. Because imagistic concept formation and integration is *not* arbitrary, but are actually *motivated* by the experientially grounded (analog) properties of the perceptual symbol or CIS that underlies the concept, the deployment of a given variation of a concept in a given context can be justified—when the analyst is fully aware of this grounding---by stronger criteria than usually afforded in closet-objectivism. Moving in this direction will go a long way towards making some headway in uniting abstract conceptualization (what goes by the name of “theory”) with substantively fruitful empirical programs in social science.

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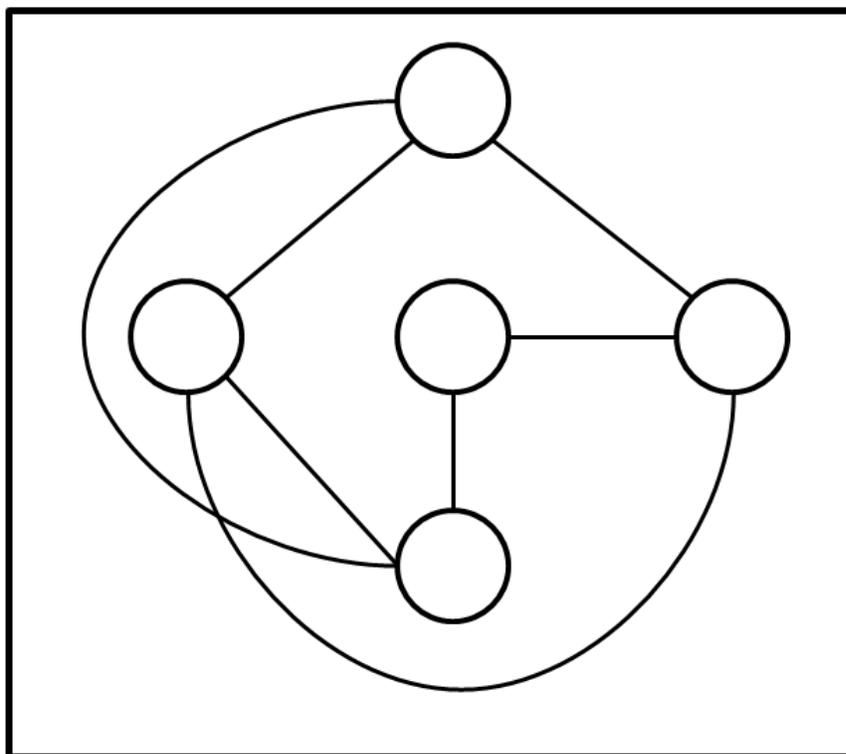


FIGURE 1. ORGANICIST COMPOUND-IMAGE-SCHEMA FOR STRUCTURE.

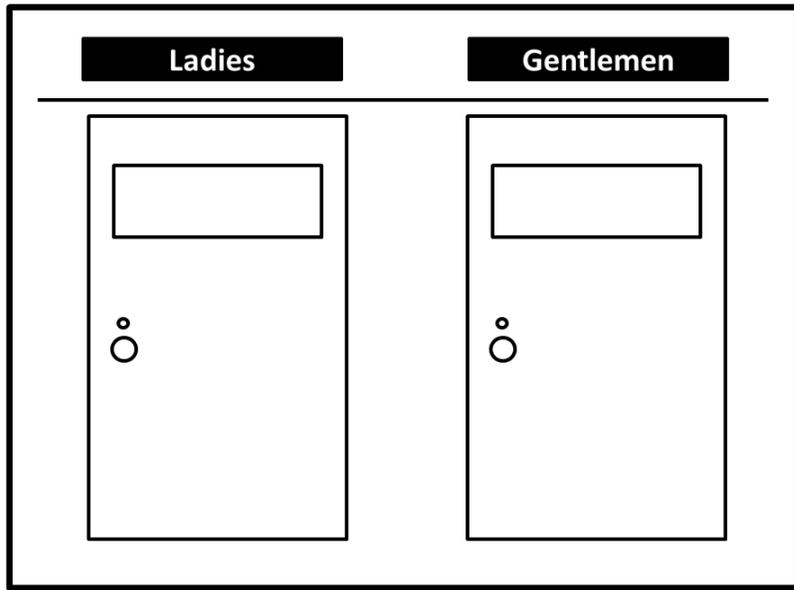


FIGURE 2. SEMIOTIC COMPOUND IMAGE-SCHEMA FOR STRUCTURE.

ENDNOTES