

# Structuralism, Reloaded

## A Review of “Social Structures” by John Levi Martin

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The attempt to institute a viable structuralist explanatory project in the social sciences (in particular anthropology and sociology) has been beset, since its inception, with what some have considered to be insurmountable difficulties. Four such roadblocks deserve mention.

1) The first, I refer to as *Piaget’s question* [Piaget 1970, 113]: “how do [social] forms acquire structural organization?”<sup>1</sup> While structuralist analysts have been content with describing static or “synchronic” patterns or dealing with the “functions” of structures, the main analytic task is to account for the *emergence* of large scale structures from the concatenation or assemblage of lower order structural components. In essence, Piaget’s question boils down to pointing out that all structuralism must perforce be a *genetic (or “generative”) structuralism* or else be condemned to irrelevance. It is no accident that Pierre Bourdieu adopted this Piagetian term to refer to his own project.

2) The second (but not less important), I refer to as *Nadel’s Paradox* [DiMaggio 1993]. This concerns the fact that while structuralist analysts attempt to develop, objective or purely formal (that is culture-free) definitions of social structure, social structure is non-negligibly constituted by the very cultural elements that are elided by analytic (or mathematical) fiat. Thus, either the analyst consciously incor-

<sup>1</sup> Another version of Piaget’s question is: “do structures call for *formation*, or is only some sort of eternal *preformation* compatible with them?” [Piaget 1970, 9, italics in the original].

porates cultural elements into her conceptualization of structure, or else they smuggle them through the backdoor in terms of operational definitions (e.g. the definition of “friend” in a network questionnaire) or substantive motivation for formalization. There are no other choices.

3) The third is what I will refer to as Braudel’s *historical wager* [Dosse 1997, 227-233]. This concerns the problematic relationship between history and structural analysis [Piaget 1970, 128-135; Lévi-Strauss 1966, 245-269]. In Braudel’s original resolution to the problem, structure would stop being the static “girders” holding up the timeless sociological building, and would become supple enough to be able to tell a story in time. In essence the historical wager points to the (always seemingly stillborn) possibility of a *structuralist history* or perhaps more modestly calls for a non-negligible role of history in structuralist explanation. Braudel’s project – in which the *longue durée* was proposed as a way for historians to “perceive structures” [Dosse 1997, 228] – suffered because he confused “structures” with large-scale material/ecological agglomerations or invariants that exercised constraint on human populations over long time-scales. So in a certain respect Braudel’s “large structures” were all about constraint and were only “social” in the most general of senses. A more effective way to cash in on Braudel’s wager would be to tell a big historical-structural story with *social* structures – including local structures – as the primary explanatory resource.

4) Finally, and most importantly, there is what I refer to as *the methodological problem*. This is in my view the most important issue and concerns the ontological (and epistemological) status of structuralist models in sociological explanation. Lévi-Strauss’ merciless dressing down of Radcliffe-Brown in his classic essay “On Social Structure” concludes with what is, in my view, the most critically misunderstood proposition of twentieth century social science: “what makes social structure studies valuable is that structures are models, the formal properties of which can be compared independently of their elements.” In their status as heuristic models they “can by no means, be reduced to the ensemble of the social relations to be described in a given society” [Lévi-Strauss 1963, 284]. Structural analysts must be clear as to how the model is different from the material and human instantiation of social structures. In essence structural explanation must be consistent with a view of science that underscores the *analogical* role of models as is the rule in the physical and biological sciences [Giere 1999]. This can be done without making the Radcliffe-Brownian mistake of concretizing structures as really existing parts of the social world.

It is the signal achievement of John Levi Martin’s *Social Structures* that it somehow manages to face head-on – that it does so with partial does not count as a criticism in this context – these four issues, thus giving a second lease on life to (sociological) structuralism on a grand scale. The first three issues are addressed consciously and

directly. The last one it does so implicitly, but I believe the most successfully. For it is in laying down a model of how structural explanation should be done, and in particular how structural models should be deployed that makes *Social Structures* the kind of book that deserves a place in all practicing social scientists' bookshelves.

How does Martin manage to deal with the four-fold challenge outlined above? First, Piaget's question. A distinctive mark of Martin's approach to formal analysis in this book is his commitment to a version of *analytic structuralism*.<sup>2</sup> Martin notes that for this analytic-structuralist project to get off the ground two basic assumptions must be shown to be defensible: first structures cannot be considered organicist or gestaltist "wholes" whereby the parts are inseparable from the structural organization of the entire ensemble. Instead, the analyst must be ready to presume that structure is *decomposable* into simple components (decomposition does not imply reduction however).<sup>3</sup> Second, given this decomposition assumption the analyst must also be ready to propose a plausible process of how simpler, local structural components self-assemble to form "large" structures (the local structure/large structure distinction plays a key role in Martin's argument). Martin argues that the mechanism of *concatenation* [Martin 2009, 11-12, 224-226] – borrowed from the work of White [1992] – is sufficient to play this processual role allowing us to tell a historical story of how large-structures emerge from more basic structural components in time.

A crucial element of Martin's analysis concerns the exact nature of these "primitive" (or "elementary") structural components. Here Martin cuts through a large swath of knotty issues in social theory by making a simple, somewhat controversial, (but ultimately fruitful) claim: the primitives of analytic structuralism are not "relations" as proposed in most formal network theory. Instead, they are "recurring patterns of social interaction, where the patterning is in regards to concrete individuals (...)" [Martin 2009, 9]. This minimalist starting point excludes a lot that has been presumed to be "foundational" in previous versions of sociological structuralism, in particular "relations" that do not involve any type of interaction between the participants and relations that do not involve natural persons as participants (e.g. relations between "classes" of individuals or relations among collectivities).

Martin acknowledges, however, that "simple structures of interaction" are themselves too fleeting to serve as a starting point for analysis [ibidem, 11]. Instead

<sup>2</sup> I borrow the distinction between "global" and "analytic" structuralism from Piaget [1970, 97-98] who uses it to differentiate a Durkheimian from a Maussian/Levi-Straussian approach.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed philosophical-historical account of decomposition as a fruitful theoretical strategy in the history of science, and how it is different from reduction, see Bechtel and Richardson [1993].

“summary scans” of the types of actions that two persons may typically engage in given that they are observed to interact in a regular (if not temporally continuous) fashion in some time window constitute a more feasible starting point for analysis. At this point Martin introduces an analytical distinction that proves to be pivotal for the book’s central argument: that between *interactions* and *relationships*. While the former are idiosyncratic bits of local social action that define a given tie between concrete individuals, the latter consist of objectified cultural “types” that define ways of relating to others (e.g. friendship, brotherhood, vassal) endowed with explicit, shared meanings to which individuals can orient themselves as if it were a “third” object independent of their persons.

For instance, given a set of institutionalized cultural patterns that dictate the meaning of friendship, it is possible for one person to sacrifice their individual well-being not for the sake of the other person, but for the sake of “the friendship” itself. Thus, while interactions are by definition “indexical” (they are endowed with properties and connotations that are not alienable from the context and the persons that are involved in them), the logic that governs relationships is potentially *transposable* across contexts. The reason for this is that relationships consist of stylized cultural instructions as to how to build *kinds* of ties with other persons. Relationships thus simplify and clarify the structural tendencies inherent in local interactions.

A *relationship* can thus be defined in terms “of the particular actions appropriate to it”; relationships are thus composed of typical forms of interaction and are the starting points for (analytic) structural analysis. The more general term “relation” is then relegated to referring to *any* imaginable analytic pairing (including cases of lack of interaction) between two persons (thus “not being friends,” “being the client of the same patron,” “being in a lower rank than the top male” are relations but not relationships, although they may form the basis for relationship formation). Relations may also emerge as a result of the concatenation of relationships into larger structures: thus, once a set of friends (a relationship) introduce all of their friends to one another a relation of *equivalence* emerges between all of the members of the clique. Martin thus answers Piaget’s question by proposing that it is possible to tell an analytical story of how large-scale structures of interest to historical sociologists emerge out of the purposive or “induced” concatenation of relationships in time.

Second, Nadel’s paradox. Martin understands better than most the somewhat uncomfortable relationship that exists between sociological structuralism and all forms of “Weberian” analysis in which the subjective point of view of the actor is taken seriously. This disregard of culture and subjectivity in sociological structuralism is traceable to the emphasis on the strict separation of the *form* from the *con-*

*tent* of relationships that animated early network analysis, with everything that is subjective, cultural and “categorical” dumped into the side of content [Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994]. What Martin does is to take advantage of this tension by building cultural content (and thus lay – or “subjective” – understandings) into his very conceptualization of structure. But he does so judiciously and in minimalist fashion. For *Social Structures* is a book that is set very squarely on good old fashioned sociological structuralism (not on the linguistic structuralism that emerges from Saussure and Jakobson and which has become the workhorse of “cultural analysis” in the social sciences).

To do this, Martin draws on Herbert Simon’s seminal proposal on the bounded rationality of social actors. Persons are theorized to rely, when navigating a sometimes complex environment composed of multiple (potential) relationships, on *heuristics*: “subjective representations that (...) most directly correspond to structural imperatives (...) (that is) a rule that could be induced by an observer as a guiding principle for action on the basis of observed regularities in this action.” [Martin 2009, 18]. Heuristics provide “efficient rules of thumb for navigating social structure.” [ibidem, 19]. Martin proposes that all basic local-structural relationships have a corresponding subjective representation of its “requirements” in the form of subjective heuristics *for* action that is in fact co-constitutive of them. In fact, heuristics exist because they are “ecologically rational” ways for actors to anticipate and match (following a “logic of appropriateness”) the structural tendencies of particular sorts of relationships.

More accurately, there is a fundamental *duality* [Breiger 1990] between the formal signatures of micro-structures (available to the analyst) and the subjective representations on the part of lay actors of the requirements to form and maintain those sort of relationships, such that latter co-constitutes the former [Martin 2009, 333]. According to Martin, the ultimate structural fate of a specific set of relationships can be traceable to their specific content or “action imperatives.” In essence, the (expected) *formal properties* of social structures and the associated *structural tendencies* of certain forms of social relationships can sometimes be read directly from the subjective meaning of that the micro-structures hold for the actors involved.<sup>4</sup>

For instance, the formal properties of friendship as being symmetrical, reciprocal (and sometimes) transitive are inherent in the meaning of friendship as a relation-

<sup>4</sup> This solution to Nadel’s paradox, as implying the transcendence of the form/content *dualism*, in favor of a form/content *duality* was anticipated by Piaget, who noted that in the case of “logical structures” there exists a “correlativity” of form and content such that “the ‘contents’ on which logical forms are imposed are not formless; they have forms of their own; else they could not be ‘potentially logicized.’ And the forms of what appeared to be pure content themselves *have* content (...) a content with its own form, and so on (...)” [Piaget 1970, 28-29].

ship; a type of interaction that requires anti-symmetry is just not friendship (although it could have some other cultural designation). The same goes from the anti-symmetry and the anti-transitivity characteristic of hierarchical structures. The definition of being patron to a client is that you are not yourself a client to your patron or your client is not herself a patron to one of your other clients.

In Martin's analytic structuralism, culture and subjective meaning are thus built into the formal properties of local structures – in fact this is one of the key insights of the book – so there is no need to smuggle them through the backdoor. Purely “formal” analysis (which ignores cultural content) simply will not do. Instead, the best analytic strategy is “(...) to focus on certain aspects of the (cultural) *content* of the relationship that *are most pregnant with structural implications (...)*” [ibidem, 11, italics mine]. It is clear that this thin deployment of the notion of culture and subjectivity will not fully satisfy those who prefer a Geertzian “thick” description, but it is certainly enough for Martin's purposes and certainly much better than most reductive deployments of the sociological structuralist strategy (which are forced – as argued by DiMaggio – to simply trade in rational actor models at the subjective level).

In this way, Martin provides an ingenious resolution to Nadel's paradox, avoiding a key stumbling block of previous versions of sociological structuralism. Here there is no direct contradiction between the formal (objectivist) description of micro-structures and what they are or mean to the actor: a friend is just a person that you expect to have a symmetrical relationship with and a person that you would expect to be a friend of your friend; a superior is just the kind of person with whom you have an asymmetrical and anti-transitive relationship with.<sup>5</sup> Martin is careful to argue that this duality does not imply a Parsonian-Lintonian *fusion* of structure into culture; in fact analytically, it is always an empirical issue whether there exist cultural understandings that accompany regularities in social interaction, since the latter *can* exist without the former.

An added bonus of the proposal that structures emerge from the subjective heuristics that dictate the structural tendencies of these relationships as they concatenate to form larger structures is that Martin is able to with one stroke solve Nadel's paradox and provide a substantive answer to Piaget's “genetic” question. For it is precisely the subjective meaning (or heuristic content) of social relationships that *dictate* that they be assembled to form larger macro-structures. Thus, *cliques* form through the subjective tendency of persons to define friends of friends as friends (a

<sup>5</sup> The uncoupling of this duality, and the relative autonomization of the subjective relational contents leads to a novel, but somewhat underdeveloped, conceptualization of institutions and institutionalization [Martin 2009, 4-5, 336-341].

classic balance-theoretic insight); *linearly ordered hierarchies* emerge out of the tendency of the strongest to beat up on the weaker who beats up on an even weaker one, and so on; hub-spoke *popularity contest* structures emerge and solidify themselves from the tendency of attractive actors to accumulate relationships which makes them more attractive for newcomers [Barabasi and Albert 1999], and so on.

Martin is thus able to use the dynamic impetus inscribed in the cultural meaning of particular relationships to explain why it is that we will see the emergence of larger structures out of smaller ones: “(large) structures emerge when relationships concatenate in ways that are nonindependent and interpretable” [Martin 2009, 22]. But Martin is able to do even better than this: for he recovers the (sometimes dressed up in incomprehensible Marxian-dialectical gobbledygook about contradictions) structural tendencies of a given form of relationship may be such that, as the process of concatenation plays out, the resulting macro-structure necessarily violates the initial subjective heuristic that gave rise to it, ultimately undermining the initial structural arrangement.

This sort of “structuralist dialectics” was something that Levi-Strauss was always after but never seemed to be quite capable of reaching [Lévi-Strauss 1966; Piaget 1970, 120-123]. Martin comes pretty close to getting there in this book. But the main analytical return is that Martin can make the subjective factor an important theoretical element in the explanation, *while accounting* for the disjunction or discontinuity between the objective result and the initial subjective meaning. This is a distinction that is critical in social theory, showing up both in middle range functionalism (in the notion of the “unintended consequences of social action”) and in large-scale systems functionalism (e.g. the disjunction of system from lifeworld). This “autonomization” of form from content also plays a role in Simmel’s version of the Hegelian dialectic as well as in most formulations of structuralism in the biological and social sciences – it is implicit in the structuralist tenet that “wholes” (large structures) have properties that are different from their lower order components [Piaget 1970, 7]. While ubiquitous, the dialectic of disjunction of large-scale from small scale structures has seldom been formulated in a way that can actually do the type of explanatory work that it does here.

In essence, under certain specifiable circumstances, structural concatenation from an initial set of subjective understandings as to the meaning of a given “relational building block” results in the release of a set of unintended consequences at the level of the structural pattern that may feedback to counteract the very subjective intentions that set the process in motion: cumulated structural form feedback to subvert (or even modify) the initial heuristic content that generated it. This means that the ultimate structural implications of relationships (readable from their formal properties

such as anti-symmetry and anti-transitivity) are only partially readable from the subjective heuristics that actors deploy to form those relationships. In Martin's rendering the structural potential of certain relationships can only be exploited through the (Simmelian) dialectic through which interactions solidify into relationships (akin to the Weberian-Simmelian notion of "societalization" [*vergesellschaftung*]). Large scale social structures grow through the institutionalization and diffusion of institutionalized relationships; this growth process results in the accretion and concatenation of relationships across relatively large temporal and spatial scales.

Here Martin leads us to what will ultimately be the key insight of the book: certain micro-structures have *structural potential* to assemble into *viable* macro-structures that actually reinforce to original structural micro-tendency while others, in the very process of concatenation, produce large structures that come to violate the original heuristic that was responsible for their emergence. The former type of (local) structure is thus a plausible building block for the formation of (large) "structures" while the latter type of local structure is not. Consider an example of the latter process: friendship cliques lose their formal properties as symmetric and transitive after a certain limit size is crossed, and devolve into hierarchical structures in which a central clique becomes the hub and peripheral cliques the spokes, a macro-structural pattern that carries formal and subjective properties that are antithetical to those that animate friendship as a relationship. Martin goes on to use a classic Durkhemian strategy of argument by elimination to review which other potential structural building blocks (and associated structural tendencies) have the potential to assemble into historically significant large-scale structures. After eliminating the symmetric clique, the anti-symmetric linear hierarchy, and the centralized hub-spoke structure (among others) Martin finds the micro-structural analogue to the Carbon molecule in organic chemistry: the (semi-ordered) tree-minimally a set of two or more actors connected to a single superior.

The tree (in the historically concrete form of patronage structures) is ideal because it does not suffer from the unrealistic constraints imposed on other structures (tendencies toward equality or completeness), constraints which become exponentially more difficult to satisfy as scale increases. In addition, the tree building block has a readily available subjective heuristic that define its meaning and that canalizes its potential: the patron-client relationship. Most importantly the tree is concatenable in such a way that the larger order structures that form are not only "self-similar" (they possess the same formal properties as the small scale structure), but also are "readable" using the same set of subjective heuristics. In addition, trees are resistant to "damage" that comes from deletion and low-level modifications (in contrast to a perfect linear order or a fully-connected clique); they are not required to be complete

or to absorb all potential participants. Trees are also good at relaying action-imperatives (such as orders) from a center to a large number of persons. Finally, trees are easily transportable and *transposable* – in the Bourdieu-Sewell sense – across a wide range of substantive contexts (fighting, economic production, politics, etc.).

While the tree is not perfect (coordination and monitoring issues increase with scale), Martin shows that coordination and monitoring challenges in large-scale tree-like structures can be solved by introducing (limited) levels of transitivity into the structure, a point that Martin attempts to substantiate using various historical examples. This structure Martin argues is thus the one that we should look for as having been significant in the history of large-scale societies (Martin's use of a Weberian functionalist-selectionist strategy at this juncture will surely leave him vulnerable to criticism from sociologists more attuned to path-dependence and contingency in historical explanation). Thus, much of what we call "large structures" (in the big, bad, they push me around and constrain my action sense) is best understood as "large-scale social forms composed of concatenated chains of patron-client ties."

And with this, Martin comes fairly near to making good on Braudel's wager for a structuralist history. In the last two substantive chapters of the book Martin tells a structural history of the rise of some of the most important "structures" in the (Weberian) sociological imagination: the state, the army and the (American) modern party system. These arise, according to Martin, out of institutions whose socio-structural signatures are clearly modeled after the semi-ordered tree: the patron-client relationships characteristic of "feudal systems" without a centralized state and the command and control structures of the army. Reviewing a sometimes overwhelming amount of world-historical evidence (weighted towards European history) in virtuoso fashion (reminiscent of Charles Tilly and Michael Mann the two social scientists who are clearly the main inspiration here), Martin argues that it is the transposition of some subjective heuristics that organize the semi-ordered tree (e.g. the notion that patron accumulate clients by offering protection and influence as long as clients vow to serve no more than one patron at a time), as well as the incorporation of pre-existing "horizontal" networks based on shared ideology and commonality of interest that account for the rise of modern "party" structures that are able to cut across local and regional divisions to produce interest-based representation at the level of the modern nation state (without devolution into factional civil war).

This analysis has some loose ends (the discussion of the history of the multidivisional form is unlikely to satisfy economic sociologists), and as with any form of "large-scale" story it is unlikely to live up to the strictest descriptive standards of social science historians. However, it certainly works for Martin's more specific pur-

poses of providing a substantive application of the analytic apparatus and theoretical argument laid out in the first two thirds of the book. I will leave it for specialists in the historical sociology of the state and emergence of party systems in modern democracies to pick through the details of Martin's argument here (I think that Martin can stand his ground when it comes to military history, which is the part of his argument where the match between structural model and historical reality is almost incontrovertible); for even though this is the part of the book that will probably receive the most criticism (as sweeping generalizations tend to be low-hanging fruit among historical sociologists), I want to note that Martin's accomplishment here is methodological as much as it is substantive: Martin provides a new way of doing "structuralist history" one that effectively joins Levi-Strauss' methodological ambitions with the Weberian penchant to tell a large-scale story using historical data (e.g. Collins, Tilly). It is a form of analytical historical sociology which does not suffer from the metatheoretical issues associated with previous attempts to do this by marrying a rational actor model with a network-theoretic conception of structure (as in the work of the great, late Roger Gould).

Which lead us to the last issue. I believe that it is in providing a working model of how structural explanation should proceed that the most enduring contribution of *Social Structures* lies. More forcefully, I would argue that the way that Martin goes about it, actually recovers and reinforces the Levi-Straussian point of view: structures are models and they may not be confused with reality.<sup>6</sup> I want to emphasize this point because I fear that the book will be largely (mis)read as actually reviving the Radcliffe-Brownian mistake that structures are "concrete patterns of social relations(ships)" that breath and exist in history (this has been a misguided but fundamental tenet of American network structuralism). I would argue that instead, *Social Structures* shows how we can deploy an analytical explanatory strategy, one that truly deserves the label structuralist, that really does justice to the Levi-Straussian intuition of the non-objectivist, heuristic status of structural models. Moreover, I think that the value of this structuralist explanatory strategy can be seen more clearly in the context of recent developments of in the Philosophy of Science which point to the "intermediary" role of models in the Physical and Biological sciences. As Ronald Giere notes,

Much philosophy of science presupposes a framework in which the focus is on linguistic entities, statements, and in which the connection between statements and the world is understood in terms of the notions of reference and truth (...) A richer, more satisfactory, picture results from introducing intermediate representational entities,

<sup>6</sup> As Martin notes, "Structures are not actual – we cannot touch them or push them around as such. They are an analytic construct, and they are an analytic construct that actors may not necessarily recognize." [Martin 2009, 16].

for which I use the designation “models” (...) Models may (...) be characterized (...) using *non*linguistic means, such as diagrams or physical scale models. On this view, the empirical representational relationship is not directly between statements and the world, but between models and the world. Here the operative notion is not truth, but similarity, or “fit” between a model and the world. Of course one can formulate the hypothesis that the model fits the world and ask whether this hypothesis is true. But such uses of the concept of truth can be understood in a purely semantic, redundant fashion. To say it is true that the model fits the world is merely a metalinguistic way of saying that the model fits. The former phrase adds not content not already contained in the latter. [Giere 1999, 73]

A lot of ink has been spilled as a result of the post-positivist debates regarding the specific format that “explanation” should take in a mixed analytical/historical science such as sociology. All that I want to do in these closing lines is to suggest that the practical use of models, in particular the models imported into sociology from graph theory and developed during the last 30 years under the banner of social network analysis, are analogical in the sense outlined by Giere, and perform the same function that other sort of models perform in biology and physics. Critiques of “covering-law” styles of explanation which presuppose sentential theories, truth-conditional relations between theoretical entities and the world and which propose the replacement of instrumentalist empiricism with “realist” mechanistic ontologies are thus superfluous and quite beside the point from the point of view of a structuralist strategy of explanation.

Thus, when Martin notes that an army is a semi-ordered tree, or that a high-school “rating-dating system” is a hub-spoke structure or that animal and human dominance systems are linear order hierarchies, he is deploying structural models in the aforementioned sense, and thus redeeming Levi-Strauss’ stance against the Radcliffe-Brownian fallacy of misplaced concreteness. For it is in the linkage, or representational fit between different parts of the relational model and their historical or real-world counterparts (and the fact that this linkage is always many to many) that all of the explanatory action lies.<sup>7</sup> This allows Martin to produce an account that is “both historical and structural” [Martin 2009, 328], which is no small feat. The issue is not whether the command structure of the army *is* a semi-ordered tree in the ontological sense of correspondence but whether it can be profitably construed in a way that is sufficiently isomorphic to it so that we can gain analytic purchase on the historical fate of army-like social structures from examining the formal properties of semi-ordered tree structures. It is precisely because the structural model is partially independent from the specific historical social formation that the analyst analogizes as being “sim-

<sup>7</sup> For more on this particular epistemological point, see Piaget [1970, 35-44].

ilar” to the model (e.g. feudal patron-client ties) that allows the theorist to cash-in on the formal commonalities that such an organizational structure has across space and time in relation to other social formations. This is where the power and the promise of a true sociological structuralism resides, but it is also where its ultimate limits lie.

In this last respect, rather than giving the impression of being the beginning of a new, exciting research program, *Social Structures* rather feels like a well-deserving closing chapter for the project of a specifically “sociological” form of structuralist explanation. For in spite of its unmitigated success in outlining a somewhat coherent form of sociological structuralism, it is precisely at those points where Martin’s strictly sociological project begins to burst at the seams that the reader begins to detect the promises of new and exciting vistas. At least from this reader’s perspective, if sociological structuralism has a future this future can take two possible forms. One would be a boring, dessicated one in which current students take *Social Structures* as a “foundation” upon which to build a sociological structuralism in the Kuhnian “normal science” mode (as one of the esteemed sociologists who wrote a “blurb” in the back cover of the book exhorts us to do). This is a future that I am betting against. Alternatively we can imagine a future in which the specific strategies deployed by Martin in his effort to escape the limits of previous structuralist projects are taken as an invitation to finally go beyond the misguided dream of a “pure” sociological structuralism. In this scenario, it is precisely those elements that play a subsidiary (but pivotal) role in Martin’s story, such as institutions, culture and heuristics that will form the core of a mode of sociological explanation that will revel in the impurity of structures, especially the dialectic of form and content that Martin so brilliantly underscores. This is a future that I am betting on. It is thus my sincere hope that *Social Structures* will be the *last* book in “structural sociology” proper; it certainly makes a nice bookend to any shelf that begins with *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*.

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