The General Theory of Societal Domains:
The Exploration and Revelation of a Structural Framework for Human Society

*"Man is by nature a social animal; an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human. Society is something that precedes the individual. Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god***." -** Aristotle, *Politics*

Introduction

Surely what makes us "Us" is us. Beyond the arrangement of our DNA and the structure of our bodies it is how we relate and socialize with each other that makes us human beings. Throughout recorded history our species is defined by our social interactions. Even examples of aesthetics or recluses are defined by their separation from the social group, thus being apart from the group is not our natural state. Aristotle knew this when he said that "society is something that precedes the individual", others throughout history knew this, and every one of us knows this in our bones. We know this because we live within the Durkheimian social facts every day of our lives, we just rarely bother to notice it or name it. It is not unlike gravity which surrounds us from birth. We rarely notice gravity or call it out by name in our daily lives, yet we naturally accommodate it with every step we take. Many mathematicians and astronomical theorists throughout history have been aware of the effects of gravity but is was Newton's formal recognition of the force and the naming it that allowed for communal exploration and experimentation. Newton didn't have to get everything right from the start, but in naming it others were now able to advance the study and to explore its cause and effect to better benefit our society. And this is the precise place we find ourselves now in relation to better understanding how we exist within the societal framework that surrounds us every day. We seek something

rudimentary, basic, and foundational on which to build our work going forward and to help those groups and individuals who often find themselves marginalized within our societies to compete within systems that have been dominated by those who exert their own agency more effectively. Advancing the work done by Lévi-Strauss, Bourdieu, Foucault, and others, it is time for us to name the structure, experiment with it, and use that understanding to better benefit our societies. This type of research will help set the ground rules, acknowledge the foundational elements, and create a project plan to better guide our hand in building our ontology of the Societal Domains. It has never been more important than now to level the playing field by exposing the structures of our cultures and create the new models that will help us make more informed decisions.

Setting the Stage: The Structuralists

The idea of exploring and examining the human condition was not new to the nineteenth-century as we have seen above from Aristotle, but it was during that time that anthropology emerged as an intellectual discipline pioneering emergent theories. One such theory was Positivism and it was developed by French sociologist Auguste Comte and espoused in his influential work *The Course of Positive Philosophy*. Comte's experience of *The Structure* is evident when he talked about "an invariable Order, actually existing without us, and attested, whether we will or no, by every act of our existence" (Comte 1865, 26). When starting any conversation about the formal investigation of social structures, you must include Émile Durkheim. Of all the early theorists, it is clearly Durkheim who lays the cornerstone of structuralism that those who follow would build upon. Durkheim established the theoretical framework where social interactions were to be considered social facts and advanced the understanding that society was a realm unto itself, *sui generis* (Erickson and Murphy 2017, 53). One of the most significant anthropologists to work in uncovering and advancing the inquiry to a foundational societal framework was Claude Lévi-

Strauss. Working in the tradition of Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss began his investigations with his field research in Brazil and later developed his theory of structuralism in two of his best-known works, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949) and *Structural Anthropology* (1958).

French intellectual Pierre Bourdieu worked during the 1970s and 1980s to develop a theory that places individuals at the center of social process. Unlike Michel Foucault, whose theory viewed individuals and their interrelationships as being determined by discourses of power, Bourdieu held that these same persons and social arrangements are created by human agents who assemble their cultures through practice, or *praxis*. Either way, the taxonomies wielded by the powerful in relation to the powerless are relevant only insofar as they are lodged within a configuration of social relations. For Bourdieu, social structures and cultures were not to be compared to machines or organisms, because culture and society are ultimately not things but systems of relationships, or fields. Bourdieu defined his fields as fluid, open-ended networks of objective relations between positions. Complex societies, he argued, were composed of any number of fields (i.e., artistic, intellectual, economic, religious, etc.), which, although coexisting spatially and temporally, were nevertheless discrete and integrated according to their own internal *logics*. Within fields, the total imposition of one group's set of taxonomies upon another's results in the production of a natural order, or *doxa*, in which the essentially arbitrary character of the powerful taxonomies is obscured. What emerges, for the powerful and powerless alike, is a sense that certain thoughts, feelings, and actions are part of the outer objective world, while others (those of the dominated) are "unnatural." In short, social relations that come to be taken for granted are the result of one interest group's symbolic domination of others within a society. Unlike Foucault's model, in which individuals are simply dominated by a powerful system that exists independently of their own actions, Bourdieu's model stipulates that this system of meaning-in-

conflict is characterized by individual social actors participating in a pervasive economy of symbols in which autonomous individuals and groups attempt to accrue and distribute symbolic capital, or symbols of prosperity and prestige, with differing degrees of success. Bourdieu referred to the wellspring of this individual agency as the *habitus*, or the ways in which personal history and social positioning allow individuals to improvise or innovate (Erickson and Murphy 2017, 163).

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: Clarifying *The Structure* and Next Steps

Clarifying *The Structure* is much more than defining structure in and of itself, it is an acknowledgement of who we are. Abraham Maslow was succinct when he said, "We do have a nature, a structure, a shadowy bone structure of instinctoid [sic] tendencies and capacities, but it is a great and difficult achievement to know it in ourselves" (Maslow 1954, 273). We have seen practitioners from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries define and use "structure" in various ways. So, let us first look at the difference between "a" structure and *The Structure*. Lévi-Strauss understood the difference between the structure of things and the underlying foundational societal structure when he said, "the unconscious activity of the mind consists in imposing forms upon content, and if these forms are fundamentally the same for all minds— ancient and modern, primitive and civilized— it is necessary and sufficient to grasp the unconscious structure underlying each institution and each custom, in order to obtain a principle of interpretation valid for other institutions and other customs, provided of course that the analysis is carried far enough" (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 21). Finally, this brings us to the whole idea of the terms "Structuralism" and "Structuralists". It is understandable that we have the need to label things, it is part of what I am doing here, but I believe it is required that if we are to move the discussion forward, we need to come to terms, well, with our terms. I am under no illusion that we will not

totally do away with the terms "Structuralism" and "Structuralists" since they have been accepted for many years as a defining "ism" of anthropology and the social sciences, but I believe that they should be properly used in their historical sense going forward. To return to our example of gravity, you may have gravitational theories that explain how and why gravity affects us, but gravity itself is a law. I posit that if we can show societal domains to be foundational, we should treat *The Structure* in the same way we treat gravity – as a law. This allows you to have theories about the effects of societal domains (and more importantly the cultural spheres that populate domains) while working from a common framework. And, to take the example one step further it then becomes meaningless to call someone a "structuralist" for working with or debating social facts about *The Structure* since it is akin to saying that anyone who believes in gravity is a "Gravitationalist" - it just seems odd.

After all this discussion it would be improper to call the continuing work with *The Structure* "Neo-Structuralism" regardless of following the historic trend, so I will be calling my inquiries into the foundational framework of *The Structure* a General Theory of Societal Domains. In an audacious or foolhardy effort to reveal and define the specific societal domains of *The Structure*, I believe a five-point plan will be in order. The first step will to be create a collaborative and peer-reviewed ontology of the foundational Societal Domains. This ontology, and the website it resides on, will be revealed at the Graduate Research Symposium at the College of William and Mary in March of 2019. As part of the creation of the ontology, we will need to validate the connections between the Domains and gain a sense of their influence on each other. Next, we will need to work with a cross-functional team of subject matter experts to start the definition of the Cultural Spheres that can be present in each Societal Domain since some would be fundamental to all societies while others are unique. Finally, we will need to address Agency and

how it affects the whole system – this will need to address both historical agency and the larger task of understanding all possible agency. In the end, the desire would be to describe *The Structure* in such a way that practitioners will be able to better model our societies since even Lévi-Strauss understood the importance of models when he said, "the object of social-structure studies is to understand social relations with the aid of models" (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 289).

Why It All Matters

So, what does this all mean, and why does the revelation and codification of foundational Societal Domains matter at all? Comte was aware that, "Men have, it is true, been for a long time ignorant of this Order. Nevertheless, we have been always subject to it; and its influence has always tended, though without our knowledge, to control our whole being; our actions first, and subsequently our thoughts, and even our affections. As we have advanced in our knowledge of it, our thoughts have become less vague, our desires lees capricious, our conduct less arbitrary. And now that we are able to grasp the full meaning of the conception, its influence extends to every part of our conduct" (Comte 1865, 28). As we have seen with Comte and others, practitioners have long touched upon and worked with aspects of *The Structure* throughout history, but in not focusing a concerted effort on just the Societal Domains themselves, without an immediate attachment to some other anthropological or social theory, we have muddied the waters further obscuring *The Structure* itself. It is imperative to clarify the Societal Domains and verify them in such a way that the community can then debate the issues on an even playing field and create models and solutions that can be tested and validated. There will be no one specific use for *The Structure*, nor will there be total agreement on the cause and effects of the resulting social models. But, as with gravity, it will provide a point from which we can make informed and, hopefully righteous, decisions for our societies.

Works Cited

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