

THE METHODOLOGICAL POSSIBILITIES OF STRUCTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES IN THE STUDY OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY

Yoqubov G‘olibjon Bahtiyorjon o‘g‘li

Phone: +998 94 502 39 72

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23388397>

Abstract. *The article examines the methodological possibilities and the inherent limits of the structural and the institutional approaches to the study of social inequality. The author proceeds from the thesis that the opposition between them, as it is ordinarily presented, is false, since the two approaches answer different questions — the first explains why a given distribution persists and reproduces itself, the second explains why distributions differ across societies and how they change — but that their relation is not one of simple complementarity either, since each possesses a characteristic failure that the other cannot repair from outside. Employing comparative-analytical, systemic and logical-methodological analysis, the study demonstrates that the structural approach tends towards functionalist tautology and underdetermines mechanism, as the classical critique of the functional theory of stratification established, while the institutional approach encounters the problem of endogeneity, since institutions are themselves products of the distribution of power they are invoked to explain. It is shown that the most productive methodological strategy is the mechanism-based one developed by C. Tilly, whose categorical pairs and the four mechanisms associated with them are neither purely structural nor purely institutional but organisational, and that the duality of structure formulated by A. Giddens supplies its ontological warrant. The operational consequences for research design are determined.*

Keywords: *social inequality, structural approach, institutional approach, methodology, functional theory of stratification, durable inequality, categorical pairs, opportunity hoarding, forms of capital, endogeneity, duality of structure, research design.*

INTRODUCTION

The study of social inequality is conducted within two broad methodological traditions whose relation is ordinarily described as an opposition. The structural approach locates the source of inequality in the positional architecture of society: positions exist independently of the persons who occupy them, they are unequally rewarded, and the distribution of persons among them produces the observed dispersion. The institutional approach locates the source in rules: the formal and informal constraints that govern economic exchange, property, inheritance, employment, education and political participation determine who may obtain what, and inequality is the aggregate result of their operation. The dispute between the two is usually conducted as though one of them must be correct, and the resulting literature exhibits the characteristic features of a debate in which the participants are answering different questions while believing themselves to be contradicting one another. A methodological analysis must begin by establishing what each approach is in fact asking. The structural approach addresses the persistence and the shape of a distribution: given that a society contains positions of unequal reward, what sustains the arrangement and reproduces it across generations. The institutional approach addresses variation and change: given that societies of comparable economic development exhibit markedly different distributions, what accounts for the difference and by what means may it be altered. These are distinct questions, and an answer to one is not an answer to the other. The opposition between the approaches



is accordingly misconceived in its usual form — but it does not follow that the two are simply complementary, for each possesses a characteristic mode of failure, and the relation between them is better described as a mutual limitation than as a division of labour. The classical formulation of the structural approach is the functional theory of stratification advanced by K. Davis and W. Moore, according to which social inequality is an unconsciously evolved device by which societies ensure that the most important positions are conscientiously filled by the most qualified persons, so that differential reward is functionally necessary wherever positions differ in functional importance and in the scarcity of the personnel capable of filling them [3, p. 242–249]. The theory possesses genuine explanatory ambition: it accounts for the universality of stratification and for the association between reward and training. Its methodological defect was exposed by M. Tumin, who objected that functional importance cannot be established independently of the reward actually received, so that the argument becomes circular; that the theory assumes a range of talent which existing inequality itself restricts; and that it systematically ignores the dysfunctions of stratification, among them the obstruction of talent in the lower strata [10, p. 387–394]. This exchange retains its methodological significance well beyond the particular theory that occasioned it, because the defect it exposes is characteristic of structural explanation as such. Where the structure is taken as given, the explanation of an arrangement by its contribution to the maintenance of that structure risks converting into a tautology, since the contribution is inferred from the existence of the arrangement; and the structure, being the explanans, cannot itself be explained. The approach is thus powerful in accounting for reproduction and weak in accounting for change — which is precisely the complement of the institutional approach, whose strength lies in explaining variation and whose difficulty lies elsewhere. The institutional approach received its most influential formulation from D. North, who defined institutions as the rules of the game in a society, the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction, comprising formal rules, informal norms and their enforcement characteristics, and who argued that they structure incentives and thereby determine economic performance over the long run [8, p. 3–10]. Applied to inequality, the approach possesses evident methodological advantages: it explains why societies with similar technologies and similar factor endowments produce dissimilar distributions, it identifies the specific rules through which an outcome is generated, and it indicates where intervention is possible. D. Acemoglu and J. Robinson developed the approach into a comparative historical account distinguishing inclusive institutions, which distribute power broadly and secure property and opportunity widely, from extractive institutions, which concentrate both and are sustained by those who benefit from them [1, p. 73–81].

The characteristic difficulty of the institutional approach is the problem of endogeneity, and it is the mirror image of the difficulty encountered by the structural one. If institutions explain the distribution of advantage, what explains the institutions? The answer given by the approach itself is that institutions are the outcome of political conflict among groups possessing unequal power — that is, of a prior distribution of advantage. The explanation therefore threatens to become regressive, and in its weaker applications it acquires a tautological character of its own, in which a favourable outcome is attributed to inclusive institutions whose inclusiveness is inferred from the favourable outcome. The two approaches thus fail in symmetrical ways: the structural approach cannot derive its structure, the institutional approach cannot derive its rules, and neither failure is repaired by the simple addition of the other. A methodological exit from this symmetry was proposed

by C. Tilly, who argued that durable inequality is generated not by individual differences in capacity nor by abstract structural necessity but by the installation of categorical pairs — paired and unequal categories such as male and female, citizen and foreigner, member and non-member — at the boundaries of organisations, and by four mechanisms that operate upon them: exploitation, in which those who control a resource extract value from the effort of the excluded; opportunity hoarding, in which a network sequesters access to a valuable resource; emulation, in which the categorical distinction is copied from one setting into another; and adaptation, in which routines of daily interaction grow up around the distinction and lend it the appearance of nature [9, p. 7–20]. The methodological significance of this construction lies in its level of analysis: the mechanisms are organisational rather than either structural or institutional, and they are in principle observable. The relation between the approaches acquires an ontological foundation in A. Giddens’s theory of structuration, in which structure is understood as both the medium and the outcome of the practices it recursively organises, so that structural properties exist only in their instantiation in action and in the memory traces that orient it [6, p. 16–28]. The forms of capital distinguished by P. Bourdieu — economic, cultural and social, together with the rates at which they are converted into one another — supply the corresponding analytical apparatus for the study of reproduction [2, p. 241–258]. In the conditions of Uzbekistan, where the institutional framework of distribution is undergoing deliberate reconstruction and where the educational system is simultaneously being renewed [7, p. 325–328] and charged with the formation of the worldview of the rising generation [4, p. 314–316; 5, p. 10–13], the choice of methodological strategy is not an academic matter, since it determines which objects are examined and which interventions are proposed. The aim of the present article consists in determining the methodological possibilities and limits of the two approaches and in substantiating a research strategy that overcomes their symmetrical failures.

The study employs logical-methodological analysis in order to establish the explanatory form of each approach, the class of questions to which it is adapted and the type of inference by which it proceeds. The comparative-analytical method has been applied to the classical and contemporary formulations of the structural and institutional traditions in order to identify the point at which their disagreement is substantive rather than terminological. The systemic approach has made it possible to represent the relation between the approaches as a mutual limitation rather than as a division of labour, and to locate the level of analysis at which their symmetrical failures are overcome. The material of the investigation comprises the classical works of the functional theory of stratification and its critique, the principal statements of the new institutional economics and of comparative historical institutionalism, the theory of durable inequality, the theory of structuration and the conception of the forms of capital.

The first result establishes the division of explanatory labour between the two approaches with greater precision than the usual opposition permits. The structural approach is adapted to questions of the form why does this arrangement persist, and its characteristic inference proceeds from the observed stability of a distribution to the functions that sustain it. The institutional approach is adapted to questions of the form why does this society differ from that one, and its characteristic inference proceeds from a difference in outcomes to a difference in rules. A study that poses a question of the first type and applies the method of the second will produce an account of rules that fails to explain why they are



obeyed; a study that poses a question of the second type and applies the method of the first will produce an account of functions that fails to explain why the same function is served differently elsewhere. A substantial portion of the inconclusive literature on inequality consists of such mismatches between question and method. The second result concerns the methodological capabilities of the structural approach, which are considerable and are frequently underestimated by its critics. It permits the description of a distribution independently of the biographies of those who occupy it, and thereby makes visible the fact that the positions themselves, rather than the persons, are the bearers of advantage: a society may exhibit complete turnover of personnel between generations while its distribution remains unchanged. It permits the identification of the system of positions as an object of analysis distinct from the characteristics of individuals, and it thereby resists the reduction of inequality to differences in individual merit or effort. Its limits are equally determinate: it establishes that a structure reproduces itself without specifying the mechanism of reproduction, and the critique of the functional theory demonstrated that in the absence of such specification the explanation collapses into the restatement of the fact to be explained. The third result concerns the methodological capabilities of the institutional approach. Its principal advantage is comparative: by treating rules as variables rather than as constants, it converts cross-national and historical differences from anomalies into evidence, and it is for this reason the only one of the two approaches that can address the question of alterability. It also possesses an operational advantage, since rules, unlike structures, are objects upon which policy may act directly. Its limits are three. The first is endogeneity, already stated. The second is the measurement of informal institutions, which by their nature are not recorded and must be inferred from behaviour, with the attendant risk of inferring the norm from the conduct it is invoked to explain. The third is the temporal mismatch between formal change and informal persistence: a rule may be altered by legislation while the practices surrounding it continue unchanged, so that an institutional analysis conducted upon formal texts alone systematically overstates the effect of reform. The fourth result concerns the partial bridge supplied by the theory of the forms of capital. Its methodological productivity lies in the concept of convertibility: economic capital is converted into cultural capital through the purchase of education and the time it requires, cultural capital is converted into social capital through access to networks that recognise its credentials, and social capital is reconverted into economic capital through the opportunities such networks distribute. This apparatus explains reproduction without postulating either a self-maintaining structure or a stable set of rules, since the mechanism it identifies is the strategy of families acting over generations. Its own limit, however, must be acknowledged: it specifies how advantage is transmitted but not why the exchange rates between the forms of capital stand where they do, and these rates are themselves institutionally determined — which returns the analysis to the question it was invoked to settle. The fifth result identifies the mechanism-based strategy as the most productive available synthesis. Its methodological advantage consists in the level at which it operates. Exploitation and opportunity hoarding are neither structural necessities nor formal rules; they are activities conducted by identifiable organisations — firms, professions, schools, associations, households — at the boundaries where categorical distinctions are installed and maintained. Because they are activities, they are observable in principle, and a hypothesis concerning them is refutable in a way that a hypothesis concerning functional necessity is not. Because the categorical pairs upon which they operate are transposed between settings by emulation, the strategy also

explains the otherwise puzzling similarity of inequality structures across organisations that share no rules and serve no common function. The approach thus supplies what both traditions lack: a specified, observable and transferable mechanism. The sixth result concerns the ontological warrant for combining the two approaches, which is required if their combination is to be more than eclecticism. The theory of structuration provides it by denying that structure and action occupy separate ontological levels: structural properties are held to exist only as they are instantiated in practices and reproduced through them, so that the same practices that are constrained by a structure are the practices through which it continues to exist. Applied to inequality, this proposition dissolves the apparent paradox that institutions both explain the distribution of power and are produced by it. The two are not sequential causes but moments of a single recursive process, and the methodological consequence is that research must be designed to capture the process over time rather than to establish the priority of one moment over the other. The seventh result translates the foregoing into consequences for research design. A programme adequate to the study of inequality in a society undergoing structural transformation comprises three levels, each with its own instruments. The descriptive level establishes the shape of the distribution and, more importantly, its dynamics in respect of reversibility, which requires longitudinal or at least intergenerational data rather than cross-sectional measures of dispersion. The mechanism level identifies the organisational sites at which categorical boundaries are installed — recruitment to selective schools, entry to regulated occupations, allocation of credit, assignment of urban residence — and examines the activities conducted there, which requires organisational rather than population-level data. The institutional level compares the formal and informal rules governing those sites with the rules obtaining in comparable settings, which requires attention to the gap between enacted and operative rules. The characteristic error of applied research is to measure the first level and to draw conclusions pertaining to the third without ever examining the second.

CONCLUSION

The analysis undertaken permits the following conclusions. First, the opposition between the structural and the institutional approaches to the study of social inequality is misconceived in the form in which it is ordinarily presented, since the two address different classes of question. The structural approach is adapted to the explanation of persistence and reproduction, the institutional approach to the explanation of variation and change, and a considerable part of the inconclusive literature on the subject consists of mismatches between the question posed and the method applied to it. Second, it does not follow that the approaches are simply complementary. Each possesses a characteristic mode of failure, and the two failures are symmetrical: structural explanation cannot derive the structure from which it proceeds and tends, in the absence of a specified mechanism, towards tautology; institutional explanation cannot derive the rules from which it proceeds, since these are themselves products of the distribution of power they are invoked to explain. Neither defect is repaired by the mere addition of the other approach. Third, the exit from this symmetry lies in a change of the level of analysis rather than in a choice between the two traditions. The mechanism-based strategy locates the generation of durable inequality in activities conducted by identifiable organisations at the boundaries where categorical distinctions are installed, and because these activities are observable, hypotheses concerning them are refutable in a way that hypotheses concerning functional necessity or institutional quality are not. Fourth, the combination of the approaches requires an ontological warrant if it is not



to become eclecticism, and the theory of structuration supplies it by treating structural properties as existing only in their instantiation in practice. Institutions and the distribution of power are accordingly not sequential causes but moments of a single recursive process, from which it follows that research must be designed to capture that process over time. Fifth, the operational consequence is a three-level research programme combining the description of distributional dynamics, the identification of organisational mechanisms and the comparison of institutional rules, with the second level constituting the point at which applied research most often fails. The prospect of further investigation consists in the adaptation of these instruments to the conditions of a society undergoing structural transformation and in the empirical identification of the organisational sites at which durable inequality is currently generated.

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