SOCIAL STRATIFICATION
SEE Stratification.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE
Social structure refers to durable features of sustained, large-scale, social coexistence that shape individual conduct. Attempts to summarize the nature of human society are often said to offer accounts of social structure. Such accounts vary but typically include claims addressing five facets: (1) collective features, process, or patterns that are consistent across large populations and (3) persist for long periods and that are manifest as impersonal and implacable influences that strongly condition (5) the lives that individuals can lead. Claims to priority for particular accounts are sometimes advanced as "structuralism"—assertions of precedence for particular impersonal, extra-individual, or collective features. In polemic usage, the label has accompanied wide and varied claims of displacing superficial or shallow alternatives in favor of deep, overarching generalizations about human conduct, language, or cognitive capacities.

All social sciences incorporate some variants of the concept, but the issues posed by social structure roughly coincide with the disciplinary charter of sociology. Seminal contributions (and their authors) are often lauded for providing distinctive visions of social structure. Since such efforts address the ultimate nature of human society, they are best understood as charter statements that unite followers (and antagonists) into schools whose agreements (and disagreements) extend to the nature, content, and value of the master texts.

Karl Marx (1818–1883) traced the origin of social structure back to the necessity for humans to wrest sustenance from nature through labor. However, the results of labor include matter that has been gathered and reshaped and that if put aside today will add to the fruitfulness of any further labor. Thus fields cleared of forest, iron forged into plows, or grain not eaten but kept for seed become means of production—products of past labor that can be added to future labor to make it more fruitful.

Any society thus must address the problem of who will be assigned control of the means of production. Marx observed that the products of work, built up over generations, became the property of a relative few, who could then assign to themselves the lion’s share of the product of future work, without themselves having to do it. He suggested that collective life, including religion and politics, would be constrained to perpetuate such a division of the population into unequal classes. Individual outlooks and actions would tend to conform to interests arising from class positions. And the classes would be linked into antagonism until the growing scale of factories would insure the ascendance of the propertyless in a revolution abolishing property and bringing on a new social structure of a classless society.

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) underscored that matter was not property unless nonowners respected owners’ claims. Markets required moral solidarity to ensure that contracts were honored, for example, constraining buyers and sellers from grabbing away goods or payments without relinquishing what they had offered in return. More broadly, Durkheim argued that absent moral limitation supplied by society, humanity’s inherently insatiable desires would lure humans into vice and unreliability as workers, family members, or citizens.

Durkheim argued that moral sentiments shared in common formed social facts—enduring, extensive, external forces that constrained individuals into moral conformity. He offered three complementary accounts of how this might work.

First, Durkheim suggested that the force of society would wax and wane with the overall volume of interaction in a population, suggesting that the impact on individuals rises and falls as moral messages are repeated to them more or less frequently. In turn, the average frequency (and consistency) of moral messages arriving at each individual reflects the totals received and retransmitted by the individual’s interaction partners, taken en masse. In this manner, the moral sentiment impinging on individuals arises from collective, accumulated experience that is external and beyond individual control. Second, Durkheim also suggested that participation in collective celebrations, notably religious worship, would amplify and reinforce moral sentiments expressed through such ceremonies. Third, Durkheim feared that inconsistent messages, generated by participation in diverse groups that upheld contrasting normative outlooks or participation in groups unwilling to specify clear moral standards, would result in a state of normative dissonance and weakened moral regulation that he termed anomie.

Max Weber (1864–1920) also took issue with Marx’s insistence on the primacy of economic factors. He called attention to contrasts rooted in religious outlooks and in other sources of diverging worldviews. Weber thought the common element uniting social structures was learned adherence to schemes of values—abstract ideals spelling out goals and pitfalls. These might include how to serve God (after specifying what God or gods to serve), or the unlimited pursuit of gain, or putting obligations to kin ahead of obligations to the ruler.

Values are highly abstract and often are only expressed indirectly through parables, stories, sermons,
and the writings of sages. From these, readers, commentators, and legislators work at deriving further rules that people should follow. For Weber, uniform or structural regularity across a population was the result of enmeshing in a web of norms—morally binding rules that reflected values held in common. While Weber recognized that values and their derivative norms could derive from tradition, or from religious inspiration he termed charisma, he also emphasized that rules were subject to extension and elaboration through reasoning by experts who were learned in the code. He feared that such expanding rationality would come to confine humanity in an “iron cage” of intricate but colorless regulation.

Specialists continue to seek to purify and refine seminal visions. Most sociologists accept that many categorical contrasts, such as race, class, and gender, are collective durable features of large populations that shape lives. Many would extend this list to include the principle categories used to sort and count people in censuses and surveys—the demographic variables including age, ethnicity or national origin, religion, education, and so forth. All of these variables strongly condition a wide range of behaviors including friendship, marriage, political preferences, consumer choices, and much more.

Why and how this occurs remains open. Some would insist that such regularities require that individuals act as if extant rules and social definitions are binding. The puzzle is what (if anything) is adequate to account for assent to unequal outcomes on the scale that is required.

An alternative is that durable features reflect how (and in what degree) categories channeled persons into different settings, social pairings, and uses of time. A principal motive is that power-holders can address recurrent organizational dilemmas by drawing on widely understood social classifications to allocate work, authority, or rewards. Any population consists of individual histories that incorporate the (variable) past degree of such sorting, along with assorted consequences and correlates. Classifications are guides (of varying accuracy) to similarities and contrasts in past experience that, in turn, influence individuals and power-holders in subsequent choices over settings, pairings, and time use.

SEE ALSO Caste; Culture; Hierarchy; Marxism; Stratification; Structuralism

BIBLIOGRAPHY

SOCIAL SYSTEM
The concept of social systems became central to sociology with The Social System of Talcott Parsons, published in 1951. Parsons’s formulations were modeled on concepts of homeostasis developed in physiology rather than simpler notions of equilibrium used by Vilfredo Pareto and other earlier theorists. Parsons portrayed equilibria in social systems not as static balances among forces but as complex interdependencies involving mutual adjustments among many independent components. He emphasized that social systems are moving equilibria that accommodate change while maintaining overall stability. He noted that equilibria can break down, resulting in anomic, strain, and conflict.

SCOPE OF THE CONCEPT
For the system concept to be useful in sociology, Parsons held, it required adaptation to the empirical nature of social reality. Social systems are not concrete, directly observable entities but rather analytically defined domains of objects. They can be identified only by abstracting social interaction, relationships, and institutions from environing phenomena—physical-chemical, biological, psychological, and cultural. Yet, social systems also interpenetrate, or share elements with, their environments. They exist in time, space, and ecological settings. They gain structure by institutionalizing values and norms that have their sources in cultural systems. Their members’ affective attachments to normative orders and motivation to pursue socially validated goals derive from personality systems.

Social systems vary in size and duration. Brief interactions between individuals can be treated as social systems. So can large-scale societies that endure for centuries, such as Chinese civilization. Institutions of intermediate scale—the business corporation, medical practice, or electoral politics—are social systems. Complexes of institutions, such as modern metropolises or global trade, may be analyzed as social systems. Individuals participate in many social systems, typically adopting different social roles in each—employees in business firms, members of political parties, fathers or mothers in families.

Parsons viewed social interaction as a dynamic give-and-take of expectations among independent actors. Actors support their expectations with sanctions, invoked