

# **New Lines of a Functional Analysis of Structure!?**

Some Glosses on the Study by Ákos Huszár

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The last two years have witnessed a number of remarkable publications by Ákos Huszár in both the Hungarian and English versions of *Szociológiai Szemle* and *Statisztikai Szemle*. Considering some earlier disregard for the theme of social structure, not only on the terrain of Hungarian sociology but on a larger plane as well, the attention evoked by this new research initiative causes no wonder and is certainly to be welcomed. With a view to the fact that I have already expressed my opinion by commenting on one of the articles mentioned above (notably, in *Statisztikai Szemle*), I wish to keep my role in the present discussion somewhat low-profile – as suggested by the subtitle of this article. As for the title, and in particular the two punctuation marks at the end – taken from the game of chess – they are intended to manifest the promise of this “scientific move” which is no doubt worth of consideration on the one hand, although questionable in some respects on the other. To finish my introductory comments and turn to making substantive remarks, I will continue by offering a few points of support and making a few critiques on both sides. In contrast to my earlier comments which highlighted some alternative approaches according to distinct lines of literature, the following remarks will deploy just a minimal number of references.

**1.** Starting with the point touched on beforehand, the decrease in emphasis on structural aspects is not unrelated to the lesser role that occupation, work status, and, in general, economic inequalities have occupied on the agenda of social research. In the domestic field this results from a quite long-lasting natural backlash against the schematic class models derived from vulgar Marxist conceptions that were ideologically predominant in their respective periods (the surpassing of which was greatly helped by, among other things, the Hungarian sociology which emerged from the sixties onwards). To touch on some personal contributions as well (not without their paradoxical features), Róbert Angelusz and I expressed some disagreement with deterministic economic models when we outlined our research platform and, in particular, carried out our studies into cultural and interaction

stratification during the eighties (when we stressed the role of communication and aspects like social networks, styles of knowledge and milieus based on the former components). The individualization thesis of Beck, Schulze's 'experience society' and some prognostic statements in the larger field of social science about the "end of working society" were impulses which repeatedly pointed in this direction. After perceiving a kind of swinging of the pendulum to the other side, some time after the turn of the century we sought to re-emphasize the further significance of structural analysis and its array of traditional elements and apparatus. It is another matter that the impact of global rearrangements of technological and economic structures with their implications for increasing individualization should not be ignored. These trends have impressed the main currents of sociological practice in such a pervasive way that it may need a bit of courage even today to embark on the type of research programs that have now been undertaken by Ákos Huszár, who goes back to major domestic antecedents with their foci on occupation and work status, in some respects contrary to mainstream thought. As far as I can see, the antecedents in question have not lost their relevance for orienting research of either earlier or more recent periods. This statement may hold even more strongly if we think of the relatively simple construction of these approaches, and of their conceptual scheme which permits, at some points, a better differentiated outline than the models in current usage in the field of stratification do.

**2.** Beyond the theoretical origins that certainly dominate the whole endeavor, the chosen approach also contains some practical elements which appear to be reasonable on their own. Even if basically changed in the way it is institutionally embedded, the domestic practice of social statistics in the last half century or so has maintained important elements of continuity (those in accordance with the basic setup outlined by Zsuzsa Ferge and Rudolf Andorka not the least), with its apt interface with the international streams of stratification and mobility research. It is not without justification that the author refers in his work to the statement by Esping-Anderson concerning the certain similarity between most occupational class models in practice, which somewhat contrasts with the dissimilarity between their theoretical frames. Beyond its host of functions in the field of social statistics we have to contend with the existence of a research database of many decades that it would be unwise to ignore, even in the case of a radical change in the conceptual frame. Some significant series of comparative or national survey programs that enable some variation with regard to various theoretical intentions have been built on related modules (a former part of these studies presented a pertinent illustration concerning the occupational block of the European Social Survey that permits the construction of all the current model variants in international research practice). Even if the theoretical objectives of Ákos Huszár may in some respects differ from the domestic antecedents mentioned before, the practical solutions that are proposed

could, as far as I can see, be easily adaptable so they conform to the comparative requirements of time trends and regional analyses.

**3.** It goes beyond these frames to dwell on how functionalism and (not only) one of its leading figures, Talcott Parsons, came into “disrepute” as far as the tendencies of the last three or four decades of international sociology are concerned. In admitting that there is some justification for aversion toward the theoretical construction that at some period maintained a hegemonic position, stereotypical portrayals had a lot to do, at least as much as I can assess, with the formation of attitudes in this regard as well. The fact that Ákos Huszár (presumably also influenced by some ideas of Axel Honneth) looked for some theoretical backing in this direction may be seen by itself as proof of a novel vision; of a certain sovereignty of thinking. This line entails, in fact, broad terms of interpretation: the foundations of occupational differentiation as framed by Durkheim may be involved, just as may achievement-based, meritocratic conceptions based on later sociological developments. Although its normative pillars have from time to time been undermined by departures from reality, one may still state that, if we do not relinquish our grip on the notion of public good and related integrative objectives, we shall be not far away from being able to assess the extent of inequalities and their mutual interdependencies (or, to put it as Blau does, their consolidation), on the basis of criteria that can be derived from them. Also, if we discover some differences between social formations that function for better or worse and also the respective patterns of reward for specific performances, we may also be inclined to look for relationships between these patterns and the working efficiency of those larger systemic units. Are the structural components of given societies “in place” to provide talent, thrift and skills with opportunities to find their “destinations” (or even just to remain in the frames of the given system), and do these merits really have a decisive role when contrasted with resources of inheritance or bestowed endowments? Such functional problems (and their like) have informed investigations by Blau, Duncan and a number of other sociologists. We need not accept all the Parsonian conceptions about systemic control or the existence of a concert of values and norms to also create fruitful research from such starting points.

**4.** To turn to my critiques, the interpretation of the concept of structure itself is the first thing that should be addressed with a view to some reduction of its frames. Let us add that, when treating functional theories in the manner of Parsons, one may have to deal with substantially different conceptions of structure than is the case with typical versions of class theories. Ákos Huszár starts out with an immediate declaration of divergence from the focus on exploitation taken by neo-Marxist models (and let us note here in reference to the works of one of the front-line figures, the increasingly differentiated model by Erik Wright based on several

types of resources has in fact come quite close to neo-Weberian conceptions) and also from the interpretation of capital(s) by Bourdieu, while categorical distinctions, formations of symbolic boundaries or the nature of linkages between various types of inequalities are only indistinctly (or are not at all) present among the given theoretical frames, not to speak about the social network backgrounds of all of these. In contrast to these approaches it is the integration foci of Parsons that serve as yardsticks of orientation. This option does not lack coherence in the research program as a whole. It may be added that this emphasis on integration does not by itself define the main research perspectives, which are principally open toward several lines of interpretation (if a conceptual distinction between types of social and system integration were applied in the wake of Lockwood and others the above approaches would predominantly figure among the former, while models like those created by Parsons would be placed among the latter). As for the author's ideas regarding structure, it is a focus on employment status and earning activity that may shed light on the sources of inequalities and their generative mechanisms, although their weight is somewhat diminished by their display among horizontal aspects in the conceptual frame. While state versus market employment and the related institutions of redistribution are further elements which indicate the relevance of the theoretical setup, these elements just like the sector dimension as a whole (whether based on conceptions similar to those of Esping-Andersen's or those of other authors), turn out to have a lesser role through the process of operationalization. To make a last remark about structure, though Ákos Huszár distinguishes his approach from those that are closer to stratification (and perhaps even further from those newer types of approaches that focus on milieus), it can not be maintained that his explicitly structural aspects significantly outweigh the characteristics of the former ones, or that they exhaust, as a study of structure "writ large", the potentialities of such investigations (let us add here that the author himself, very rightly, does not present such a claim).

**5.** As referred to above, the functional approach may allow for an array of structural ideas that extends to dynamics as well, an outcome which is not far from the theoretical ambitions of the research program. Parsons, for example, pointed out some (second-order) political or integrative roles typically affiliated with specific occupational groupings (as representatives of the economic subsystem) as a particular implication of horizontal differentiation. The Merton-like version of functionalism, however, treated the potential tension between normative-integrative structures more emphatically (among these tensions being the systemic contradictions between ends and means, the existence of dysfunctions alongside positive aspects and the presence of latent functions alongside manifest ones). But even the later stream of the Luhmann-type of functionalism came up with a significant contribution in this regard by raising the problem of 'total exclusion' alongside the whole set of

subsystems, potentially even extending the given development to the situation of large social segments. This contributed to a shift of emphasis from the idea of general upgrading, a kind of universal inclusion in the frames of systemic modernization, as Parsons conceived it.

**6.** As to the expected results of this research program, much depends on the operationalization and technical implementation of basic outlines – with many options left open as yet. Substantively also belonging to the conceptual frame, the parallel role of vertical and horizontal aspects among elements of the basic setup deserves attention, too. The interpretation of these dimensions and their actual representation among the specific structural components is again a further question. As referred to above, the treatment of employment status and earning activity and the existence of some negligence (or provision of just a vague outline among conceptual frames) of sector type among the potential foci of the horizontal aspect may be disputed. Let me remind readers here of the particularly subtle dimensional elaborations by Róbert Angelusz (that started out by using the salience of the distinction between categories of identities and the respective conditions of visibility as key issues of structural analyses), with a typology based on vertical and horizontal aspects as two distinct axes, and thus able to discern non-typical elements in terms of Blau-like structural parameters (such as hierarchical ones with sharp lines of cleavage, and categorical ones with an ordered character). Should this sound too abstract, let me also call attention to the problems likely to emerge during the process of categorization implied by the parallel inclusion of occupational and working status elements in the basic model. To gain insight into the possible complications it seems worth just going through some survey data records and having a look at concrete occurrences in a random manner; the socio-demographic, and in particular, occupational blocks, may contain much information of interest. How would one categorize, just to take some examples, a registered self-employed (free-lance) intellectual, a taxi-driver (somewhat similarly forced to gain entrepreneurial status), or, taking a glimpse at another segment, a retired CEO from a multinational corporation? Further experimentation with other possible systems of classification may be underway, and would be timely. Grusky and others increasingly urge that the field of structural research gets down to empirically comparing rival models and assessing their relative power to discriminate various measures of inequality or other types of dependent variables. As one of his first pieces from the current series of articles demonstrated, Ákos Huszár is not far from the practice of such – empirical or theoretical – evaluations. It might be worthwhile testing the present model (or model versions) in a similar way, with the goal of potentially highlighting where it proves to be more or less efficient at this task. However, maybe this recommendation is pushing at an open door since such elaborations already seem quite plausible considering the systematic way the research program has been built up so far.