On the Ideas of Social Structures, Social Processes, Individual Agency

(and the Relationship Among Them

Let’s assume that it is reasonable to think societies have a certain kind of “structure” associated with them. It is not exactly clear what that means. But when we look out at society from our own individual positions in the society we can see various large institutions distributed across the physical, economic, social, and political landscape that have an important influence on both our current individual state, and our imagination of what is possible for each of us to aspire to.

We see cleared land, large farms, utility networks, markets organizing transactions that speed money and goods across space and national boundaries, exchange, large corporations that have built and now use the physical and social infrastructure associated with international commerce, influential religious groups and political ideologies that seek to protect or advance their particular ideas about what a more or less tolerant god wants us to do in his or her name, political cultures and political parties that have arisen to organize individuals into political forces that can shape government policy. And so on. Plenty of structure there – both in the sense that individuals are aggregate up in larger, more or less coherent, and more or less all encompassing groups, and in the sense that these groups can be influential, and in the sense that the structures may be very durable as well as influentional. As such, the structures narrow not only individuals might be able to accomplish (given their position in those structural arrangements), but also what might be possible for societies and individuals as a whole.

The structures seem to produce some particular results for the society. The processes that are contained within them and guide by them produce real consequences for many individuals and societies as a whole. For this reason, we are apt to imagine that at least some of these structures have some kind of agency and autonomy – that they can decide as collectives what they want to do, mobilize assets from around them, deploy those assets, and produce particular results. And, we can often see evidence of this agency in the particular structures that are used to make decisions about what to do as a collective or institutional force. We see this in private organizations, in voluntary sector organizations, and in governments.

Self conscious, hierarchical organizations arise with particular purposes, ownership of particular assets, knowledge about how to produce particular results, and the administrative means for reliably directing assets toward the goals. Such organizations may have different ideas about their purposes, who may become a member, what membership entails on both sides, . Some might be closely held private organizations with most of those who contribute to the effort bought and paid for their services. Some might give more standing to the views and welfare of those who work for them. Others might be much more widely owned or much more consultative as to purposes. Still others might have only the sketchiest of organizational structures that help to define and guide the actions of the individuals who may or may not think of themselves as part of an organization.

This litters the landscape with many different kinds of formal and informal instituational structures that bind individuals together more or less self-consciously more or less symmetrically, more or less intensively and exactlingly, more or less durably, and more or less faithfully and happily.

We could then decide that this is what we meant by social structure – the array of formal and informal collective associations that spring up to enable us to accomplish collective purposes, to tell us what we have to do to accomplish those goals, and to motivate and control us to do what we need to do.

A broader idea of social structure would go well beyond the formal organizations and our roles in them. It would describe a much wider and more invisible but perhaps no less strong lattice work that reaches beyond particular organizations into the fabric of family and daily life. Laws, norms, culture, etc that tell us what to do, Chafes, but also gives guidance and confers virtue. Creates no small amount of security and a sense of control. These might have a large influence ecause they are widespread and powerful in shaping both our actions, and our thoughts about what is possible and impossible, appropriate and inappropriate, right or wrong in the circumstances.

This gives us a picture of social structure as a means of social control and influence, but also of production of many things that individuals value including material goods, justice, but also affiliation and camaraderie.

But this view of social structure ignores the important cell in the body politic that creates no small amount of conflict and the potential for change. One structure is the individual. It is a feature of liberal democratic societies that they as collectively agreed upon political system (itself a kind of institution) give a great deal of standing to individuals. They attribute to individuals agency. Also identify and purposes and character. They grant ownership. They assume that individuals can do what they will with the things they own as long as it does not unfairly or unjustly interfere with what other individuals also enowed with liberbyt, autonomy and property are trying to do.

They also give individuals political rights to use the state as they wish as an instrument to accomplish their individual and social purposes, giving them poplitical rights to become the architects of their own restraint, as well as the the energy and purpose that gives their individual lives menaing and significance to them.

Here is what we have so far about structure:

Here is what we might think about process.

Now things get complicated.

These structures are created by humans, but the structures also shape the prospects for humans. Th

individually, . , and whatever it does mean, any reasonably analytic representation of it is likely to be very complicated.

But both our subjective experiences and observations of how others around use seem to think, talk, and act suggests that each of us is living in a kind of structure or web that connects us together in various ways. We are aware of what we own, what we have the right to do, what responsibilities to have -- even what status we might occupy and how much autonomy, influence, and satisfaction that status gives us vis-à-vis others (if the various offices were arrayed in some kind of hierarchy.)

We can see that the idea of status is closely linked to the idea of social structure. We can also see that the idea of status might also be linked to the degree to which we live up to the responsibilities of as well as enjoy the rights of the status we hold.

It seems likely that each of us occupies many different possible offices. There is some symmetry in our understandings of these offices, but also much that is resented, contested, or indecently enjoyed. it is pretty clear that it well complicated.

We create that structure alone and together, consciously and tacitly.