

Notes and Reflections

THE CONCEPT OF INTERNATIONAL CONFIGURATION

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In their attempt to observe, understand, and interpret social realities, including, obviously, internationalized realities *per se* and as they undergo change, sociologists resort to more or less well-accepted conceptual tools.

One of these tools is the concept of **structure**, which is extensively used in everyday language and in scientific discourse, particularly by the large majority of authors aptly described as structuralists. The idea of structure appears to correspond to the endeavour of searching for the framework that confers consistency to the social reality, which is important to examine beyond its observable forms. This search presupposes that, in the same way the skeleton supports the group of organs in living organisms; in human societies we also have a network of relationships and a mesh of interactions that sustain the social construction.

Let us recall a few examples. In linguistics, structuralists like Saussure were the forerunners of this type of thought when they defended the concept of language as a structure, a system of signs. In anthropology, Lévi-Strauss' structuralism sees the web of kinship relations as the support of ancient societies. Indeed, in its own way, Marxism is also a form of structuralism, given that it understands social groups as lying on relations of production. Several other sciences, such as mathematics or psychology, resort to structuralist categories in their analyses. In the same fashion, structuralist theories applied to international relations are also well-known, particularly those advanced by Immanuel Wallerstein.

Generally speaking, the concept was studied in depth by Jean Piaget¹, for whom the idea of structure comprises three elements: wholeness, transformation, and self-

¹ See Piaget, Jean 1970 (1981) *Structuralism* (Portuguese translation by Fernanda Paiva Tomaz used here), Lisbon: Moraes Editores: 10-20.



regulation. Above all, a social structure is something singular which represents the whole, where all the elements that constitute it form a set. This set has properties that differ from its elements when considered individually. However, this wholeness is not static, and its dynamism generates transformation processes, develops its own potential, goes through stages of growth, consumes energy in the process, and, ultimately, tends to disintegrate. Effectively, these transformation processes end up causing inevitable disequilibria. This is due to the dissipation of energy (entropy) and subsequent exhausting of the potentialities, which require the existence of compensation devices capable of correcting disequilibria through self-regulation mechanisms. According to Piaget, those three elements are vital to our understanding of the idea of structure: the creation of a coherent whole, a capacity to adapt and transform, and the existence of tools to readjust the whole.

The concept of **system**, very much present in distinct scientific fields, and at the core of a vast number of theories, stands quite close to that of structure. In the field of international relations, systemic analyses have become widely used, as well as the expression "international system", even in non-scholarly language. Systems theory has been used in several interpretations of the internationalisation processes. As Morton Kaplan earned fame for his inventory of possible international systems², Kenneth Waltz took this theme to the sphere of "realist" classical thought by applying systemic theories to the study of international relations, which granted him the classification of "neorealist"³.

Returning to the concept of system *per se*, among other in-depth studies on the topic, one can emphasize the work of Georges Lerbet⁴. In his view, system adds the notion of interaction with the milieu to the idea of structure, which translates, basically, into the exchange of energy between the structure and the environment surrounding it. Between the dynamic wholeness in question and what surrounds it (the "surroundings"), a regular exchange of interactions occurs, a two-way flow of energies where we indeed find the idea of system that results from this new mixture of structure plus network of interactions. Systems can be closed (like those in machines) or open (such as those in living beings, either biological or social ones). In the case of the latter, the exchange of energies can take up several forms, such as, for instance, material flows or information flows. For some authors, the analysis of systemic processes can be done according to the cybernetic model of input, output and feedback, through an action and reaction complex.

The truth is that specialists almost imperceptibly slide from the concept of structure to that of system in the vocabulary they use, as if the two concepts were synonyms. Often, structure is given a predominantly static meaning, whereas system is presented as an essentially dynamic meaning. One just has to read the book that is probably the most complete work on the application of the concept of system to international relations, authored by Michael Brecher⁵. He writes that "a system contains,

² See Kaplan, Morton (1957). *System and Process in International Politics*. New York: John Wiley.

³ Waltz, Kenneth (2002). *Theory of International Politics* (translated from English into Portuguese by Maria Luísa Felgueiras Gayo), Lisbon: Gradiva.

⁴ See Lerbet, Georges (1986). *De la structure au système: essai sur l'évolution des sciences humaines*. Éditions Universitaires: 18-21. See also, by the same author, *Approche systémique et production de savoir*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993.

⁵ Brecher, Michael (1987) "Système et crise en politique internationale" in Korany, Bahgat (org) *Analyse des relations internationales*, Québec: Gaetan Morin Éditeur / Centre québécois de relations internationales.



simultaneously, static and dynamic elements. The structure refers to the manner players are placed in relation to one another. The core variables are the number of players, and the distribution of power among them. The process designates the interaction networks that exist among players in a system. The core variables of the interaction are type, identified with the continuum conflict/cooperation, and intensity, which reflects the volume of interactions during a given period of time. There is, thus, a link between structure and process: each structure has an interaction process; and a structure creates and maintains regular interactions" (83)⁶.

Now that we have referred to these two concepts of structure and system, perhaps our preference goes to a third one, developed by the German sociologist Norbert Elias: the concept of configuration: Aiming at overcoming the dilemma presented by a sociology anchored on human beings as individuals, versus a sociology that sees human beings as societies, he advanced the word "configuration" to describe the situation where the multiform relationship among individuals in a interdependence environment takes place. This brings about a set of tensions, where not only minds but people interact as a whole and where reciprocal actions and reactions occur⁷, regardless of the level of relationship.

When explaining the intellectual tool which the concept of configuration represents, Elias provides detailed examples. To demonstrate his point, he presents the situation of four men sitting at a table playing cards, precisely forming a configuration, given that among them there is an obvious relation of interdependence: each person's game depends intrinsically on the game of the others. However, Elias then adds that the word applies "both to relatively restrict groups, and to societies formed by thousands or millions of interdependent beings"⁸. In this sense, a school class, a therapeutic group, an urban conglomeration, a nation... represents configurations, thanks to the interdependence networks which form them.

Accordingly, the word configuration is appropriate to describe very distinct realities, ranging from the small group of card players to the international system.

As a side remark, one can mention that this proximity of ideas – game, internationalization – brings to mind the application of game theory to the analysis of international relations⁹, not to mention the metaphor of the "grand chessboard" Brzezinski chose as the title of his famed book¹⁰.

One of the merits of this concept developed by Norbert Elias is to remind us that large social groups, obviously collective as they are, do not cease to be human. The anonymity of multitudes must not make us forget that they are formed by individuals, and in themselves represent a whole.

⁶ See also *ibidem*, page 82: "An international system is formed by a set of players who are placed in a configuration of power (*structure*), involved in regular interaction networks (*process*), separated from other units by a domain's functional *borders* and whose behaviour is subjects to the internal (*context*) and external (*surroundings*) constraints of the system".

⁷ See Elias, Norbert (1986). *Qu'est-ce que la sociologie?* (translated from the German by Yasmin Hoffman), Paris: Éditions de l'Aube: 154-161. 'Individuals' and 'society' are not two objects living separately, as the current use given to the words may lead us to believe. In fact, they are distinct, yet inseparable, levels of the human universe" (156).

⁸ *Op. cit.*: 158.

⁹ The work Rusconi, Gian Enrico (org.) (1989), *Giochi e paradossi in politica*, Torino: Einaudi, is particularly interesting.

¹⁰ See Brzezinski, Zbigniew (1997) *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy And Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, New York: Basic Books.



There is a field where this viewpoint is particularly clear: international relations. We are accustomed to considering States as privileged, even exclusive, agents of those relations. As we know only too well, we are now forced to add the roles of multiple players. However, the role of individuals as global players must also be included in this new inventory, as they interact powerfully with collective players. Let us recall contemporary individuals like Mikhaïl Gorbatchev, Karol Woitila, or Nelson Mandela and the influence they imparted in the development of world events. To counteract a discourse so often exclusively centred on the game of "powers", it is useful to complement analysis with personal decisions and individual influences. By reinforcing the importance of people as individuals, this perspective allows us to "humanise" our observation of international relations.

Furthermore, the sociology of large human groups appears, thus, committed to including the intersubjectivity dimension in its analyses. The concept of configuration comprises this complex crossing of interdependences, where individuals-in-interpersonal-relationships and societies attain consciousness.

By including multiple scales, the notion of configuration points to these manifolds platforms of communication and interaction where social events take place, and where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In the same way a concert performed by an orchestra is not merely the superimposition of the various instruments that form it, presupposing a common denominator where each element is integrated at a higher level, in social configurations there is equally a surrounding wholeness that is delimited by the dense network of interactions and capable of adding meaning to each of its components.

In short, the concept of international configuration, perhaps even more than that of structure or system, may be particularly appropriate, as a mode of representation, to describe world reality in its various dimensions: a dynamic wholeness subject to major transformations and able to balance its critical disequilibria by resorting to correcting mechanisms; change and interaction processes expand within it, creating networks of interdependence where individuals play relevant roles.

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