

Craig Calhoun, Marshall W. Meyer and W. Richard Scott (eds.): Structures of Power and Constraint. Papers in Honour of Peter M. Blau

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Peter Blau will be familiar to the readers of this journal as an author who, for over twenty years, has done research and written on organizations, with titles like *The Dynamics of Bureaucracy* (1955), *Formal Organizations: A Comparative Approach* (1962; with W. R. Scott), and *The Structure of Organizations* (1971; with R. A. Schoenherr) coming immediately to mind. However, as Calhoun and Scott point out in the Introduction, Blau's work ranges over a much greater variety of topics including social exchange theory, stratification and mobility, and the formal analysis of social differentiation. The volume which the three editors put together to honour Peter Blau, with whom they had worked as graduate students, was intended to devote one part each to these four main themes, though through no fault of theirs, the planned section on stratification was not realized in the end. Thus, after the introduction and a biographical contribution by Robert K. Merton, the book now presents five papers on *Exchange, Power, and Inequality* (Part I), five papers on *Formal Organization* (Part II), and another five on *Inequality and Heterogeneity* (Part III). Among the co-ntributors, there are famous names such as George Homans, James Coleman and Stanley Udy, several of Peter Blau's co-authors, as well as former students of his. The contributions are both theoretical and empirical, and most of them relate explicitly to his work.

Peter Blau has not only written on a variety of different topics, he has also espoused different analytical approaches in the course of his professional life — from a broadly functionalist one in his early years via the action-oriented approach of *Exchange and Power in Social Life* to his later structuralist work, best represented by *Inequality and Heterogeneity* (1977). The title of the collection, which means to express the now familiar tenet that social structures both present opportunities for (empower), and constrain, action, relates more to Blau's predominantly structuralist concerns than to his explorations in action theory.

Inevitably, a book embodying different approaches, intellectual traditions (Weberian, Durkheimian, Simmelian) and a variety of topics ranging from rational-choice theory over demographic changes among Roman Catholic priests to social networks, will be of selective interest to any given reader. For a review in *Organization Studies*, Parts I and III of the book will therefore be referred to only briefly. Part I unites contributions by George Homans, James S. Coleman, Karen Cook, Tom R. Burns and O. Dudley Duncan. While Homans argues that rational choice theory is a special variant of behaviourism, Coleman attempts to show that rational action can lead to the emergence of social norms — something that Peter Blau has already shown empirically in his early study of interpersonal

relations in government agencies. Departing from a strictly rational choice perspective, both Burns and Cook seek to add sociological flesh to the economic skeleton. Duncan's chapter finally extends a line of his earlier work with Blau by attempting to distinguish family from birth-order effects on educational attainment.

The authors in Part III are Josef E. Schwartz, John Skvoretz, Peter V. Marsden, Ronald S. Burt and Ronald L. Breiger. All of their contributions are very much in the line of Blau's own concern with the impact of different dimensions of social differentiation on social relations. Thus, Schwartz applies the approach laid out in *Inequality and Heterogeneity* to friendship choices in school classrooms, while Skvoretz focuses on patterns of intermarriage. The chapters by Marsden and Burt demonstrate the usefulness of national survey data for approaching empirical issues and macro-social theory, without testing any of Blau's theories directly. Breiger, finally, uses Blau's approach in a formal analysis of relations between oil-producing and oil-consuming nations.

As Scott points out in the introduction to Part II, an interest in the determinants and consequences of organizational structures has been central to much of Blau's theoretical work and empirical research. Among other things, Blau was interested in the impact of organizational size and functional differentiation, a line of investigation that later crystallized in the Aston school type of organizational analysis; an approach that has long been a hallmark of work published in this journal. However, the contributions assembled in the section on formal organization do not so much elaborate this structuralist paradigm as attempt to extend and modify it. Along this line of reasoning, the more theoretical contributions by Meyer, Udy and Heydebrand are of particular interest. The other two contributions in this section report results of empirical studies, one dealing with the demographic effects of the decline in the number of clergymen and its consequences for the Roman Catholic church organization (Schoenherr and Young), the other presenting a detailed analysis of employees' assistance programs (Blum).

Marshal Meyer starts his paper by taking up an old issue, i.e. the selective (and biased) reception of Max Weber's work in organizational sociology. Weber, he argues 'all but dropped from sight' in present-day organizational research (p. 191) when the structure-efficiency paradigm was superseded by the approaches of contingency theory (Lawrence and Lorsch), population ecology (Hannan and Freeman), and the institutionalism of Meyer and Rowan. At present, Meyer sees these approaches as being superseded, in turn, by a kind of dialectical return to a rationalist approach in the wake of economic transaction-cost theory. Meyer labels this new paradigm 'commodity model'. The critical reader, however, may well ask whether the invasion of the economic transaction-cost approach has really affected organizational research proper, as much as it has theories of governance at the societal macro-level, while network concepts to which Meyer pays but scant attention are becoming influential in the study of intra- and inter-organizational relations. Meyer's review of

the Weberian tradition in organizational research is itself a highly selective account characterized by a striking Anglo-Saxon parochialism in the literature referred to (not even Michel Crozier is as much as mentioned). Nor does it reflect a great familiarity with the work of Weber. Thus, Meyer observes correctly that in the structure–efficiency model, presumably based on Weber's theory of bureaucracy, the power element was neglected, but he fails to see that the efficiency Weber claimed for bureaucracy rested largely on the instrumental character of this type of organization *for its (political) leaders*: it was in fact the core function of bureaucracy to be a *power* instrument!

Heydebrand, too, is concerned with a new model of organization, though he limits his discussion to academic institutions, linking it critically to Blau's *Organization of Academic Work* (1973). While Blau thought in terms of a dichotomy — and a resulting tension — between professional and bureaucratic modes of control in academic organizations, Heydebrand diagnoses their 'emergent historical reintegration' (p. 272) in what he calls 'technocratic administration' — a set of administrative strategies of crisis management based on technical–instrumental criteria of decision-making (*ibidem*). However, as Heydebrand goes on to describe in detail, this presumably new model turns out to be a variant of a well-known type described more than thirty years ago in the seminal study by Burns and Stalker (*The Management of Innovation*, London: Tavistock 1961). In fact, technocratic administration differs from their 'organic model of organization' only in the emphasis on the use of modern computer technology.

Stanley Udy in his paper develops the thesis that certain structural inconsistencies are intrinsic to the process of 'administration' itself. While the recognition of unresolvable structural strain in organizations is not new, Udy locates the source of such strains not in the co-existence of conflicting objectives or functional imperatives, but in a basic conflict between physical and social constraints. The solution of this conflict by internal differentiation is, however, again the familiar one. Udy then outlines four strategies for dealing with the resulting coordination problem, that miraculously correspond to four dominant approaches in organizational research. These strategies are specific to the basic conflict Udy identifies; the reader, however, is not necessarily convinced that the conflict between physical and social constraints is actually the most important tension to be coped with in real organizations.

By trying to reflect in these collected papers the whole range of Peter Blau's academic interests, the resulting book is more heterogeneous than readers on a specific topic normally are. This might have been offset by the superior quality of individual contributions. In that part of the book devoted to organizations, at least, the papers are of high quality, but none of them appears to make a new breakthrough.