

Structuralism became an intellectual fashion in the 1960s in France, where writers as different as Roland Barthes, Foucault, and Louis Althusser were regarded as representatives of the new theoretical current. In this broad sense, however, structuralism is not one coherent theoretical perspective. The Marxist structuralism of Althusser, for example, is far removed from the anthropological structuralism of Lévi-Strauss. The structural method, when applied by different scholars, appears to lead to different results.

The onslaught of criticism launched against structural functionalism, class theories, and structuralism indicates the problematic nature of the concept of social structure. Yet the notion of social structure is not easy to dispense with, because it expresses ideas of continuity, regularity, and interrelatedness in social life. Other terms are often used that have similar, but not identical, meanings, including social network, social figuration, and social system. Starting with his work in general sociological theory in the mid-1970s, British sociologist Anthony Giddens suggested the term structuration to express the view that social life is, to a certain extent, both dynamic and ordered.

The critical difference between social structure theory and structuralism is one of approach. Analysis of social structure uses standard empirical (observational) methods to arrive at generalizations about society, while structuralism uses subjective, interpretive, phenomenological, and qualitative analysis. Most sociologists prefer the social structure approach and regard structuralism as philosophical—that is, more compatible with the humanities than with the social sciences. Still, a significant number of sociologists insist that structuralism occupies a legitimate place in their discipline.