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Reflections on Institutional Theories of Organizations

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Contemporary institutional theorizing in the field of organizations dates back thirty-odd years. This particularly describes what are called new or neo-institutionalisms. These terms evoke contrasts with earlier theories of the embeddedness of organizations in social and cultural contexts, now retrospectively called the 'old institutionalism' (Hirsch & Lounsbury, 1997; Stinchcombe, 1997). They went through a period of inattention, so that when institutional thinking came back in force after the 1960s, it seemed quite new.

Institutional theories, as they emerged in the 1970s, received much attention in the field, along with other lines of thought emphasizing the dependence of modern organizations on their environments. Perhaps surprisingly, they continue to receive attention, and seem to retain substantial measures of vigor. One secondary aim, here, is to explain why.

I primarily review the status and prospects of the principal themes of institutional theory. I concentrate on sociological institutionalism, as capturing core ideas in their most dramatic form, rather than the limited arguments emphasized in economics or political science.

And within sociological versions, I concentrate on phenomenological theories. These reflect my own interests, are continuing loci of research creativity, and contrast most sharply with other lines of social scientific theorizing about organizations. In practice, 'organizations' tends to be both a research field, and a realist ideology about modern society: phenomenological thinking steps back from that commitment, and is useful in analyzing, for example, why so much formal organization exists in the modern world (Drori, Meyer, & Hwang, 2006).

BACKGROUND

Throughout most of the post-Enlightenment history of the social sciences, notions that human activity is highly embedded in institutional contexts were central. Individuals were seen as creatures of habit (Camic, 1986), groups as controlled by customs (famously, Bagehot's cake of custom or Spencer's folkways and mores), and societies as organized around culture.

The nature of the institutions and their controls over activity, in social scientific thinking, was never clear and consensual. Theories ranged from economic to political to religious. And they variously emphasized more cultural forms of control or more organizational ones. Then, as now, anything beyond the behavior of the people under study could be seen as representing a controlling institutionalized pattern (a strikingly clear definitional discussion is in Jepperson, 1991).

Over the long history of social scientific thinking through the mid-twentieth century, institutional theories grew and improved. Sophisticated syntheses like Parsons' were produced, with many variations on broad evolutionary schemes and typologies, as high Modernity progressed. But they came into dialectical conflict with another aspect of the same Modernity. As 'men' came to believe they understood the institutional bases of human activity, they also came to believe they could rise above, and control, them – no longer subject to, but playing the parts of, the now-dead cultural gods. Embeddedness in culture and history was a property of the superstitious past, over which the Moderns had triumphed. So institutional thinking could survive in anthropology and about primitive societies (including earlier Western history), but only tenuously in the social sciences of Modernity (Meyer, 1988).

In short, the old institutionalisms were driven into marginality by the rise of (often policy-oriented and scientific – see Toulmin, 1990) conceptions of social life as made up of purposive, bounded, fairly rational, and rather free actors. Society was discovered, headed by the sovereign state as its central actor, freed by the constitution of Westphalia. The human person as individual actor was discovered, unleashed by markets, democracy, property rights, and religious freedom. And rationalized social life, made up of bureaucracies essentially delegated from the state (as in Weber or Fayol) or associations built up by individual actors (as in Barnard), was discovered and celebrated.

In the new schemes, built around notions of society as made up of empowered actors,

older institutional theories tended to crumble. Studies of persons no longer attended to notions of habits (Camic, 1986), and concepts of culture and custom as driving forces receded. If the old institutions remained, they remained as dispositional properties of the actors involved – tastes and values of individuals, core values of states and societies.

The key concept in the new system was the notion of the 'actor' – variously, individual persons, national states, and the organizations created by persons and states. Society was produced by these powerful entities. It was made up exclusively of actors, and even the rapidly disappearing peasants could be analyzed as individual actors. Social change was a product of such actors: thus the continuing use of an individualistic version of Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis as a proof text for proper social analysis (e.g., Coleman, 1986; Jepperson & Meyer, 2007). And all this had a normative cast – social institutions that restricted the development and choices of real social actors could be seen as inefficient at the least, and perhaps as destructive of freedom and progress.

The new models remain in force, and it is now conventional in social science publications to refer to 'actors' rather than people and groups. But over time there have been doubts about models of society and the world as made up of interested actors, and only of actors. Too many studies of individual persons showed astounding levels of embedded non-actorhood in what were supposed to be political, economic, and cultural choices. A whole literature on organization in actual social life showed the overwhelming importance of uncertainty in organizational (non)decisions (Cyert & March, 1992) and of the informal resolutions involved in practice (Dalton, 1959; and many others): formalistic or technicist analyses (e.g. Perrow, 1970; Blau & Shoenherr, 1971) seemed much too limited. And notions of rational sovereign nation-state action as driving development did not stand up against the realities of chaotic Third World nation-states, and the surrealities of the First and Second Worlds' Cold War.

So since the 1970s, in every social science field except anthropology (where older institutionalisms had never receded), 'new' institutionalist theorizing appeared, with models again envisioning people and groups as embedded in larger structures and cultures of one sort or another (Jepperson 2002 for a review). There have been as many different varieties as in the 'old' institutionalisms, but they all have had one main element in common. They all have come to terms with one or another version of the idea that society is made up of interested purposive, and often rational actors.

If the old institutionalisms had seen people and groups as rather naturally embedded in broad cultural and structural contexts, the new institutionalisms incorporate a tension in the conceptualized actor–environment relation. This is often seen as a stress between structure (i.e., the environment) and agency or actorhood (see e.g., Giddens, 1984; or Sewell, 1992), in replication of the debates in the old institutionalism about free will and determinism.

The new institutionalisms see the social environment as affecting the behaviors and practices and ideas of people and groups now conceived as bounded, purposive and sovereign actors. Many different lines of thought are involved, varying in their conception of what an actor is, and what properties of which environments are relevant.

TYPES OF INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

Most institutional theories see local actors – whether individuals, organizations, or national states – as affected by institutions built up in much wider environments. Individuals and organizations are affected by societal institutions, and national-states by a world society. In this chapter, we focus on these lines of theory.

But it can be noted that some other lines of thought treat modern actors as affected by the institutionalization built into their own histories. Older ideas about habit, custom, and culture are resurrected as theories of what is now

called 'path dependence.' So that individuals or organizations, faced with a new problem, use their accustomed older solutions whether or not these ever worked or can reasonably be expected to work (see the various essays by March and his colleagues, 1988).

In the present essay, we leave aside this line of institutional theory, and concentrate only on lines of argument locating institutionalized forces in wider environments than the history of the actor itself. These tend to fall on a broad continuum ranging from more realist theories to more phenomenological ones. After reviewing this range of arguments, we turn to focus more intensively on the phenomenological side of the spectrum, which is of special interest here, the locus of the most distinctive advances in the field, and an important contribution to a field which tends to merge theory and realist ideology in ways that are often unexciting.

Realist institutionalisms

Some institutionalist lines of thought, arising particularly in economics and political science, retain very strong notions of society as made up of bounded, purposive, sovereign, and rational actors. In economics, these might be individuals or organizations, operating in market-like environments. In political science, they might be sovereign national-states operating in an almost anarchic environment. Institutionalism, in such schemes, involves the idea that some fundamental institutional principle must be in place before systems of such actors can effectively operate. The classic core principle required in economic versions is property rights (North & Thomas, 1973). In international relations theory it is the principle of nation-state sovereignty (Krasner, 1999).

Once the core principle is in place, systems of actors freed from further institutional influences are thought to function stably and effectively over time. Indeed, further institutional interventions in the market or international polity are thought, in extreme versions

of these traditions, to be counter-productive disturbances of rationality. There is a tendency to see the situation as one of punctuated equilibrium. Collective history operates briefly, creating the crucial change, and then stable equilibria ensue. So there are accounts of the unique circumstances producing the construction of property rights in Western history. And there are discussions of the similarly unique circumstances producing the magic of Westphalia, thought to undergird the rise to world dominance of the Western nation-state system.

Extreme realist institutionalism, thus, retains very strong assumptions about the capacities of actors, and very limited pictures of the institutional environment. The environment really contains only one narrow institutional rule – and in most versions it is a rule created by the actors themselves, whose existence and character are seen as entirely prior to the institutional regime.

Over time, realist institutionalism has tended to become a good deal less extreme, and more realistic (see e.g., North, 1981). To property rights, the economists add a variety of other important institutions needed to make the modern system go (Jepperson & Meyer, 2007). A variety of institutions must to reproduce and socialize the population, for instance, and a knowledge system is required to encourage technical improvements (Mokyr, 1992). And perhaps even some cultural supports for entrepreneurship are needed (Landes, 1998). Similarly, realist political scientists add institutional elements necessary to make the world political system work: guarantees of agreements, and trust, for example. In political science realism, as well as in economics, however, the institutions thought to be required are also mainly thought to be products of the interested activity of the basic actors involved.

Compromises with realism

Moving away from more extreme realist thinking, much modern social science is built up around more complex pictures of

the institutional context of actorhood, and a conception of the modern actor as rather more penetrable. The institutions have cultural or discursive dimensions, and also structural or organizational ones. The key term describing institutionalized culture, here, is ‘norm,’ especially common in political science (see for extended examples, Katzenstein, 1996). The key notions of institutionalized organization, especially utilized in sociology, are ‘relation’ or ‘network’ (Granovetter, 1985).

A norm is a rule with some degree of binding authority over actors – for instance, in international relations, the principle that a state should not kill the diplomats representing other states; or the proscription of chemical weapons in war. In the most realist theories, a norm is created by the actors involved, and has binding power over an actor only inasmuch as that actor continues to support it. In less realist versions, norms may have been created by forces in the past, and may have binding power whether or not present actors support them. In these latter accounts, norms are internalized by actors through some sort of socialization process: thus, in a compromised realism, actors are partly creatures of the rules, not only creators of them.

Similarly, a network relation between actors is a simple form of organizational institutionalization. Such relations are thought to constrain actors, as well as provide opportunities for their activities. In the most realist versions, actors create their networks: in less realist models, the networks are more institutionalized, have prior histories and external determinants and thus generate considerable path dependence.

Sociological institutionalism I: social organizational versions

Moving further away from realist models, we come to some core ideas of modern sociological institutionalism (see DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 2001; Jepperson, 2002; Hasse & Kruecken, 2005). Here, actors are substantially empowered and

controlled by institutional contexts, and these contexts go far beyond a few norms or network structures. Further, these contexts are by no means simply constructions built up by the contemporary actors themselves, but rather are likely to have prior and exogenous historical origins.

Institutions, in these conceptions are packages or programs of an expanded sort. 'Regimes' is a term employed in political science for the idea—organizational packages infused with cultural meaning (often from professions as "epistemic communities").. So one can refer to a neo-liberal regime in the contemporary world. Or an anti-trust program in earlier America (Fligstein, 1990). Sociologists capture this idea by referring to societal sectors, or social fields, or arenas of action. Institutions, in these senses, are complex and often coherent mixtures of cultural and organizational material.

Similarly, the institutions involved penetrate actors in multiple and complex ways, ranging from more realist formats to more phenomenological ones. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) provide a list that is much utilized (see Scott 2001, for a related one). On the realist side, they argue that institutional structures affect actors through what they call 'coercive' processes, including nation-state legal actions. On the middle ground, they envision 'normative' controls of environments over actors, emphasizing the influence of professionalized standards. And then, moving to a more phenomenological perspective, they suppose that environments create standards that actors adopt 'mimetically,' reflecting taken-for-granted standards. At this point, actors are not really well-bounded entities any more, but may be built up of cultural and organizational materials from their environments.

Sociological institutionalism II: phenomenological versions

A key turning point in the rise of the new institutionalism is the development of a per-

spective in which the actors of modern society are seen, not simply as influenced by the wider environment, but as constructed in and by it (see Jepperson, 2002 for a review). Related ideas in political science are called 'constructivism.' Rationalized organizations as actors are creatures of rationalized environments (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Meyer & Scott, 1983; see also Zucker, 1977). The individual as actor is a continually expanding construction of modernity (Meyer, 1986, following on a long discussion in the literature, including Berger, Berger, & Kellner, 1973). The nation-state as actor is a construction of a world polity (Meyer, 1980; Thomas, Meyer, Ramirez, & Boli, 1987; Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997).

The concept of 'actor,' in this scheme, is far removed from that envisioned in realist perspectives. The realists imagine that people are really bounded and purposive and sovereign actors, and that nation-states are too. And so are the organizations deriving from these. The sociological institutionalists, on the other hand, suppose that actorhood is a role or identity, as in a theatrical world (Frank and Meyer 2002): individual actors, in this usage, have socially conferred rights and responsibilities, and socially conferred agency to represent these (and other) interests (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). Actorhood, in this usage, is scripted by institutional structures; and the relation between actor and action is no longer a simple causal one – both elements have institutional scripts behind them, and their relation has, causally speaking, strong elements of socially constructed tautology. That is, the actor–action relation is a package, and as people and groups enter into particular forms of actorhood, the appropriate actions come along and are not usefully to be seen as choices and decisions. Institutional theories, thus, do not depend on particularly elaborate social psychological assumptions about people or groups: almost any social psychological model is good enough to explain what institutionalization has made socially obvious.

Thus, when a group of modern people gather to assemble or change an organization,

they do not do so from scratch. Everywhere, there are models put in place by law, ideology, culture, and a variety of organizational constraints and opportunities. People are likely to install these in the organization they are building with little by way of thought or decision: exotic psychological assumptions are not required. There will be offices and departments that were unknown a few decades ago (CFO, or Chief Financial Officer; HR, or Human Relations Department). Few will spend time deciding to adopt these institutions, and thus perhaps the word 'mimetic' applies. But it is an imprecise word, in this context, because the people adopting the new structures will often be able to articulate clearly the legitimating rationales for their action, as if these were thought-out purposes. The purposes come along with the enterprise.

As an illustration at the individual level, any good student in a prestigious American university ought to be able, almost instantaneously, to write some paragraphs about 'why I decided to go to college.' But on inspection, it turns out that almost none of these students actually decided to go to college, as they had never contemplated any alternative. Going to college was taken for granted. Indeed, any student who had spent serious time deciding whether or not to go to college would be very unlikely to have a record enabling admission to a prestigious one. Nevertheless, many researchers studying college attendance formulate their task as analyzing a 'decision' – a decision they probably never made, and their subjects probably never made. A number of methodological errors follow, and beset the research tradition involved. Parallel errors characterize much research in the field of organizations and states: decision analyses of matters never in fact decided. Mistakes of this sort routinely follow from the established realist assumptions that human activity, more or less by definition, follows from choices.

Sociological institutionalism of the phenomenological sort is not only furthest from realism, but arises in some opposition to it. Realist theory, it is argued, grossly understates the

extreme cultural dependence of modern organizational structures. Thus, the institutionalists emphasize that much modern social rationalization has mythic functions encouraging the formation of organizations and their components. This sometimes leads to criticisms that institutionalism is only about 'symbols' rather than 'realities,' and institutionalist research occasionally in fact makes this mistake. On the other hand, the realists, ignoring the dependence of modern organizational structure on the rapidly-expanding myths of rationality, have no serious explanation for the rise – in every country, every social sector, and almost every detailed social activity – of so much modern organization itself (Drori et al., 2006).

Phenomenological ideas are by no means incompatible with more realist ones - in most situations, both can be true and often are. Tensions arise because realist models tend to be exclusionary core modern ideologies, undergirding polity, economy, culture, and society. They are normative models as well as cognitive ones, and thus alternative lines of thought are seen as in part normative violations. Further, closed-system realist models are often central to policy advice, and this function is limited by more open-system institutional theories.

The career of sociological Institutional theory

The phenomenological perspectives of sociological institutionalism have prospered over the last three decades. Before discussing why this is so, we need to note why it should not have been so.

The ideological absorption of institutional ideas

Modern social science, following on modern ideology, celebrates a social world made up of strong actors, in the realist sense. Theory and ideology give great emphasis to notions of society as a product of such actors and their purposes. Methods of social research, and public data collection, build data on and

around these units, and define proper analyses as focused on both their independence and their purposive action. And normative ideologies infusing both research and public life give much preference to treatments that take individual persons (and also nation-states and organizations) as highly interested and agentic actors (Jepperson & Meyer, 2007).

More concretely, modern democratic political systems rest, for their legitimacy, on doctrines of free individual choice. If the individuals and their choices are constructions of the powers of the system itself, the legitimacy of democracy tends to disappear. Similarly, if choices of individuals and organizations in markets are in fact 'wired' consequences of the market system, the legitimacy of the free economy is undercut. The same points can be made about religious and cultural choices in the nominally free society. Thus, there are cultural tendencies in the modern actor-centered society to celebrate actors in a very realist sense: these tendencies are very strong ideological currents in the social sciences. Social science influence over policy tends to depend on them (Jepperson & Meyer, 2007).

Consider that much organizational research and theory go on, worldwide, in schools of business and education and public policy. These schools are built on the notion that organizational leaders are decision-makers, and their main tasks are to train their students to be such decision-makers. They are in no position to emphasize that their students are, or should be, drifting non-decision-making followers of institutionalized currents. Scott (2007), for instance, defends realist institutional theory on precisely these grounds.

Thus as new institutional forces are built up in the modern system, the system itself tends to absorb them in expanded theories of actorhood and decision-making. Organizational members and research analysts tend over time to see the organizational elements newly adopted under institutional pressures as if they were functional, rational, and reasonable organizational choices. This process is analyzed with care in studies of the

developments, in American organizational life, around affirmative action pressures and requirements (see Dobbin & Sutton, 1998; Edelman, 1992; Dobbin, Sutton, Meyer, & Scott 1993; Edelman, Uggen, & Erlanger, 1999). After the long wave of legalizing pressures on organizations, a whole set of schemes are produced – policies, offices, and professions – responding to these pressures. Organizations incorporate packages of these. But after a time, it is all naturalized in the preferred models of relatively rational actorhood. And by now, any reasonable organizational manager would be able to explain why his or her organization has affirmative action policies – these policies are obviously the best way to ensure hiring the most able people.

Given that the processes stressed by the phenomenological versions of institutional theory are in many ways constantly undercut or absorbed by evolving modern organizational systems, the question arises as to what forces keep these lines of theory alive, well, and in fact prospering. If the social world were moving toward a modern equilibrium, we have noted above, institutional theories would tend to be absorbed in a socially constructed realist ideology. Obviously, equilibrium is not what is going on.

The rapid social changes distinctive to the period since World War II have tended to create rapid cultural expansions of the sorts attended to by institutional theories. The period, in other words, creates both institutional theories and a globalizing social world which operates along the lines suggested by those theories.

Stateless globalizations

Recent centuries of development have systematically tended to create interdependencies transcending the organizational capacities of extant political systems to maintain control (classically, Wallerstein, 1974). Rapid expansion and globalization have created sweeping economic, political, social and cultural forms of (often conflictful) movement and integration extending far beyond the boundaries of controlling organizational structures. Forces

for social control and stability, thus, emphasize both the authority and the responsibilities of the existing actors in national and world society. At the world level, meanings have piled up, rationalizing and expanding the powers and responsibilities of national states. And similarly, individualisms, stressing the rights, powers, and capacities of individuals, have expanded enormously, supporting for example the long-term and dramatic expansion of education around the world (Boli & Ramirez, 1987; Meyer, Ramirez & Soysal, 1992). The whole process is analyzed in Tocqueville's discussion of social control in stateless America (1836/1969), and his emphasis on the resultant empowerment and control of the individual, including the rapid expansion of a great deal of mobilized and rationalized social organization.

The term globalization now tends to refer to (a) economic interdependencies, and (b) very recent time periods. But for our purposes, the time frame is much longer, and the interdependencies involved more political, social, cultural, and military than economic. The post World War II period represented a dramatic up-turn in the long history. The failure of social control in an interdependent world was dramatic and incontrovertible. Two devastating world wars (both between supra-state forces), a disastrous depression seen as rooted in nationalist provincialisms, the holocaust and sweeping destruction of social life, and the end of normal war given nuclear weaponry, all made it obvious that new forms of order and control were necessary. This was all enhanced by the Cold War conflict, and by the destruction of the older stabilizing colonial arrangements. An old nominally-anarchic world of conflicting nation-states was no longer remotely justifiable: war, for instance, lost meaning as a heroic achievement in interstate competition. But on the other hand nothing like a world state was plausible.

In the absence of much possibility for state-like world organization, with a cultural system organized around positive law, the world has produced an astonishing set of socio-cultural movements building up a ver-

sion of a world polity or society around notions of lawful nature, inherent rationality, and the natural rights of humans (or, in general, natural law: Thomas et al., 1987; Meyer et al., 1997). These movements take the form of broad global wave-like developments, and a 'wave theory' like sociological institutionalism is appropriate for the massive changes involved.

Thus the character of worldwide social change since World War II continually reinforces the more phenomenological versions of sociological institutional theory. I briefly note some of these massive social changes, and their wave-like diffusive character. All the changes involved refer to laws and rationalities and rights built into nature rather than particular societies. They are built around rapidly-expanding meaning systems and formally structured in decentralized associational formats rather than around sovereign actorhood.

First, there is in place of positive law the dramatic expansion of science (Drori, Meyer, Ramirez, & Schofer, 2003). Science expands exponentially in terms of numbers of people and amounts of resources involved, and also in terms of the social authority it carries. It expands enormously in terms of content coverage, as essentially all aspects of natural and social worlds come under scientific scrutiny. And it expands spatially, finding a strong presence in essentially all the societies of the world. Science, as reality and even more as metaphor, provides a cognitive and normative base for all sorts of integrating world regulation – making the world more governable (Foucault, 1991; Rose & Miller, 1992; Drori & Meyer, 2006).

Beyond science, there is the enormous expansion of rationalizing social science – by far the most rapidly expanding fields in the life of the university in the last half of the twentieth century (Drori & Moon, 2006; Frank & Gabler, 2006). Theories, and occasionally evidence, expand rapidly and take the center stage in much policy-making around the world. In a world celebrating the equality of persons and societies, rationalistic social theories are seen as applicable

everywhere: any country can develop, any person can be equipped with cultural capital, independent of time and place. And any organization, anywhere, can and should be a rational actor.

Second, in partial replacement for an older Modern celebration of the primordality of the national-state, there is the dramatic rise of a natural law emphasis on human rights. The standing of persons as citizens of national states is replaced by a greatly expanded set of doctrines of the person as an entitled and empowered member of the human race in a global society (e.g., Soysal, 1994). More and more categories of humans are directly capacitated in this system – women, children, old people, handicapped people, gay and lesbian people, indigenous people, racial and ethnic minorities, and so on (for examples, see Ramirez, Soysal, & Shanahan, 1998; Berkovitch, 1999; Frank & McEaney, 1999; Abu Sharkh, 2002). And the moral and legal principles involved rapidly take coverage (though commonly not practical effect) worldwide (Hathaway, 2002; Tsutsui & Wotipka, 2004; Cole, 2005; Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui, 2005).

The new human, in this expanding system, has greatly enhanced rights, and responsibilities. But also greatly expanded attributed capacities for economic, political, social, and cultural action. These capacities support the extraordinary worldwide expansion in both mass and elite education in the world since World War II (Meyer Ramirez and Soysal., 1992; Schofer & Meyer, 2005).

The expanded model of empowered and entitled individuals, operating in a tamed and scientized natural and social environment, generates – as in Tocqueville's America – the expanded modern picture of the human actor; and of the host of social organizations this actor creates. The world is now filled with human persons who assume the posture of empowered actor, and have the capacity to create and participate in collective organizations formed as social actors.

So organization and organizations blossom everywhere (see the studies in Drori et al.,

2006). The old nation-state, with its passive bureaucracies, is reformulated as a modern organization, filled with agencies that are to function as autonomous and accountable organizations (i.e., actors: Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). Old family firms are reconstructed as modern organizations with empowered managerial capabilities, and with work forces full of participatory modern individual actors. Traditional structures housing professionals – hospitals and schools and legal and accounting partnerships – are reformulated as real agentic social actors, capable of the highly purposive pursuit of their own goals (Scott, Ruef, Mendel, & Caronna, 2000).

All of the institutionalizations of the new globalized (or 'knowledge,' or 'post-modern') society noted above find a core basis in the dramatically expanded educational systems of the post-War world (Meyer et al., 1992, for mass education; Schofer & Meyer, 2005, for the university). The university, in particular, is the core home of the explosions of scientific analyses of nature, and rationalistic analyses of social life that try to tame the modern supra-national environment. And it is the core home where ordinary persons of an older world are transformed into knowledgeable and empowered carriers of 'human capital' for the new society (Frank and Meyer, 2007). If classic bureaucratic structures of the Modern society rested on populations equipped with mass education (Stinchcombe, 1965), the organizations of the Knowledge Society rest on university-installed knowledge and empowerment (Frank and Meyer, 2007). Worldwide, about 20 per cent of a cohort of young persons is enrolled in university-level training (Schofer & Meyer, 2005).

Actors and others

The post-War period has, thus, experienced dramatic expansion in cultural rationalization. On the one side there has been the exponential and global growth of the scientific and rationalistic analysis of natural and social environments. On the other lies a sim-

ilarly exponential and global growth in the rights and powers attributed to the human beings who enter into society. And in the culturally-constructed crucible at the center of all this, the result is the extraordinary modern growth in social actors. Passive old national state bureaucracies turn into actors filled with plans and strategies. And persons everywhere shift from traditional (i.e., peasant) identities into modern schooled ones: as an indicator, persons turned actors are able to opine on all sorts of general questions – and survey research can now be done almost anywhere (Meyer and Jepperson 2000).

But the question arises, who is doing all this cultural construction? Who or what supports the rationalization of the natural and social environments? Who props up all the new human rights and powers?

The world of actors – entitled and empowered beings with the rights to have goals and the capacities to be agents in pursuit of those goals – is also a world in which the same actors have the legitimated capacity to use their agency in pursuit of collective goods of all sorts. Indeed, the agency of actors is collectively legitimated and dependent. In this sense, a properly constructed actor is always partly an agent for one or another collectivity – in the modern system, often a fairly universal one – as well as an agent for his or her own needs and goals as actors (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). Thus modern actors are partly above petty interest, and are agents for more general and universal goods. So the most rapidly expanding individual occupations, worldwide, are the nominally disinterested professions: they may partly serve particular interests, but they are in good part agents for the collective – more accurately for what used to be called God (Truth, and the like). And the most rapidly expanding organizational structures in the world may, similarly, be the non-governmental and often non-profit organizations that serve as agents for various universal goods, often at the global level (Boli & Thomas, 1999). And even among the more mundane profit-making organizations and

occupations, agency with very constrained interested actorhood has been a great success: everywhere there are consulting firms, therapists, advisors, researchers, and other creatures of a higher purity.

Thus actors themselves often step out of their narrow actorhood, and take on the higher calling of agency for universal truths and the collective good. So we have successful national-states offering themselves to their competitors as models of the proper conduct of business. And successful organizations delighted to display their virtues, rather than concealing them from the competition. And individual persons entering into public life with disinterested analyses of what their President should do (Jepperson, 2002a).

If ‘interested actor’ is one core role in the modern system, we need a term for the roles of actors that adopt a legitimated posture of disinterest, and tell more interested actors how to be and what to do. I suggest the old Meadian concept of ‘Other’ (Meyer, 1999). The modern world is filled with these others. There are the representatives of the whales and other creatures, of the distant ecological future, and of the rights of humans in the most distant places and cultures (e.g., over issues like female genital cutting – see Boyle, 2002). And there are the proponent of social rationality and critics of corruption anywhere in the world. Closer to home, there are the advisors and therapists, offering consultation to individuals and organizations and national-states on how to be more virtuous and more effective actors.

This whole system offers explanatory opportunities calling for sociological institutional theories. The modern nominally-realist interested actor is at every side surrounded by institutions with much cultural character and legitimacy – the sciences and professions constructing the rationalized environment of proper ‘action,’ the legal and intellectual constructors of expanded human rights and capacities, and the ‘Others’ who create these arrangements and who often directly instruct the expanded actors. And of course, the

expanded actors themselves, who enhance their value by displaying their virtuous actorhood, and whose expanded and virtuous actorhood is utterly dependent on a host of sciences, legal and intellectual supports, and therapists and consultants. In fact, the modern individual actor tends to incorporate much of this material in the expanded 'self.' And the modern organizational or nation-state actor certainly incorporates enormous amounts of this material – often as professionalized roles – within its formal structure.

The core arguments of sociological institutional theory: status and prospects

Sociological institutional theory employs general phenomenological perspectives which often have many dimensions and which can make up a broad vision of social life and of methods for studying it. Methodologically, a taste for qualitative and highly interpretive research is sometimes involved. Substantively, critical perspectives on the modern liberal society are often emphasized, sometimes from the conservative right, and on other occasions from the left. Sometimes, society itself is seen as entirely an interpretive construction, with other realities entering in only insofar as they enter social interpretive systems.

As it has developed, sociological institutional theory is tied to none of these broader philosophical perspectives. Methodologically, it has commonly been pursued with quite standard (often quantitative) procedures. Its ties to any normative perspective on modern society are weak: at the most, it carries an ironic distance from a naïve liberalism. And there is no special tendency to deny the operation of many different theories (and variables) in the analysis of the modern system – sociological institutionalism emphasizes causal structures rooted in culture and interpretation, but is not given to denying other lines of causal process. Thus Barrett, Kurzman and Shanahan (2006) note

that national population control policies tend to arise in countries with ties to modern demography, and typical institutional argument. But they are not surprised to find that national population control policies tend also to arise in countries with great population density. Institutional theory is not closely tied to broader philosophical concerns, but has rather developed as a set of very general sociological explanatory ideas.

To assess the status of sociological institutionalism, we review its four most important explanatory ideas. These ideas make up a simple causal chain accounting for stability and change in modern organizational structures. First, expansive modern institutionalized models of states and societies are commonly generated, not only by interested actors, but by what above we called 'others' – collective participants like professions and social movements and non-governmental structures. Second, states and other organizations tend prominently to reflect institutionalized models in standardized ways, not simply the local resources and powers and interests that vary so greatly around the world. Third, there is the idea that because states and other organizations reflect highly standardized institutionalized models, but also variable local life in practice, a great deal of decoupling between more formal structures and practical adaptation is to be expected. Fourth, there is the idea that institutionalized models are likely to have strong diffusive or wave-like effects on the orientations and behavior of all sorts of participants in organizational life, whether or not they are incorporated in formal policies.

Cultural and institutional forces affect the development of institutional models

As a result of extensive research showing the impact of institutionalized models on organizations of all sorts, argumentation in the field of macro-social research has shifted to the question about the origins of the models involved. For instance, we know that the worldwide emphasis on the rights of women has greatly impacted policy and practice

everywhere (Bradley & Ramirez, 1996; Ramirez et al., 1998). So it becomes important to ask what produced the worldwide emphases involved.

Very extreme realists argue that institutions are produced by the mixture of power and interest in the actors of the system – the only entities such realists recognize as existing. This makes the institutions involved relatively minor in importance, since an adequate analysis can be obtained simply by understanding the extant structures of actor power and interest. A more moderate realism sees a ‘sticky equilibrium’ as involved – institutions are created by mixtures of actor power and interest, but may take on something of a life of their own afterwards. A still more moderate realism supposes that there are some mediators in the power and interest game – some participants (possibly professionals, or other honest brokers) who help in the enterprise.

Beyond this point, realism may be combined with a more political or sociological view. Stinchcombe (2001) develops an argument along these lines, imagining that actors and perhaps some mediators struggle to work out general institutional rules that reflect local power and interest circumstances but also reflect functional requirements of the whole enterprise. In his work, he often thinks of institutional arrangements in complicated sectors like the construction industry as instances. His arguments apply less clearly to the worldwide rise of something like gay and lesbian rights (Frank & McEneaney, 1999).

Given the great successes of institutionalist analyses in showing the great impact of environmental models on the structures and programs of organizational actors in the modern system, realism has been on the defensive. One position to which it has retreated is the stance that, while modern actors copy environmental models, these models themselves must have been put in place by hard-line realist forces of power and interest. Realism has, as noted above, strongly legitimated and legitimating roots in the modern system, which clearly rests on

the assumption of very strong and agentic human actorhood. So attacks along the line that powerful and interested actors in the background drive the creation of institutional models have been intensive (e.g., Stinchcombe 2001; Hirsch 1997; Hirsch & Lounsbury 1997). And to a striking extent, some institutionalists have taken positions that are almost apologetic in response (Scott, 2007; DiMaggio 1988), apparently conceding that behind the façade of institutional structure inevitably lie real men of power.

Sociological institutionalists, of course, do not take issue with the argument that many institutionalized patterns may directly reflect the power and interest of dominant states or other organizations. But, especially under conditions of modern globalization as we discuss above, institutionalists observe dramatic effects that do not reflect the mechanics of power and interest. In global society, and also in other organizational arenas, many other phenomena operate — reflecting the dependence of modern expanded actors on institutionalized scripts operating in their environments. For example:

- Professionalized and scientized forces may generate rules coming to terms with modern sciences and rationalities, and with modern notions of human rights and welfare. Despite powerful interests working in the opposite direction, for instance, environmental policies like the ozone layer agreements have taken on considerable force (Meyer, Frank, Hironaka et al., 1997b; Frank, Hironaka & Schofer, 2000). Similarly, it is difficult to see power and interest – and easy to see professionalized forces – behind the worldwide movement to restrict female genital cutting (Boyle, 2002). Large-scale social movement structures and non-governmental organizations are obviously involved in the construction of many institutional systems. Thus many programs for organizational rationality, like the International Standards Organization, or various bodies stressing improved accounting arrangements, find their origins in forces considerably removed from simple matters of power and interest (see the papers in Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002; Djelic & Quack, 2003; Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006; Drori et al., 2006 for extended examples).

- Constructions of institutional models may reflect successes and failures in organizational or international stratification systems, without necessarily reflecting the interests of the powerful bodies in that system. Because globalization involves the construction of myths of underlying world similarity, an extraordinary amount of diffusion goes on as a matter of fashion (Strang & Meyer, 1993). So Japanese economic success of the 1980s produced a little wave of Japanified policies around the world, in no way reflecting the purposive power or interest of the Japanese national-state. Similarly, there is much imitation of elite firms in any industry, whether or not the elite firms encourage, or gain from, this imitation.
- When powerful or successful organizations in fact portray themselves as models for others, it is often unclear that they are acting in what is ordinarily conceived to be their interest. The American national-state, for instance, likes to encourage others to do things the 'right' way – the American way – as a matter of encouraging virtue in the world. There is no evidence that much of this aid activity particularly benefits the interests of the American state.

In many areas, institutional and realist explanations of the development of institutionalized models overlap. And conflicts between them are often conflicts over the interpretation of the effects of the same variables. Thus when institutionalists note the impact of professionalized models (e.g., in the accounting area), the realists talk grimly of the professions involved as carrying out 'professional projects' presumably to enhance their interests and powers (see Abbott, 1988 for examples often incorporating this sort of reasoning). The impact of the scientists who discovered the ozone layer problem is, however, difficult to interpret as a simple Machiavellian scheme to enhance the power of the sciences. And, indeed, the whole 'professions as plots against the body politic' scheme runs into the problem that the picture of the profession as a rational self-interested actor requires the assumption that the general population is naïve and foolish. This is unrealistic: explaining the expanded authority of the sciences in the modern system requires an institutional analysis of why so many

social audiences are so eagerly responsive (Drori et al., 2003).

Similarly, realists tend to see any diffusive influence of the stratification system as indicating the power and interest of the elites of that system. This is implausible. Thus, in global society, the world environment movement clearly reflects the values and orientations of American society. But the American national-state actor clearly resists subscribing to this system, as do leading American corporations. As another example, the world human rights movement clearly reflects American values: but the American national-state actor was reluctant to have a human rights declaration built into the United Nations; and continues to refuse to ratify various human rights treaties. In exactly the same way, massive worldwide efforts at all sorts of organizational reform and rationalization clearly reflect American ideologies of organization: but the American national-state aggressively resists participation.

Exactly the same criticisms can be made of realist argument in other organizational arenas. Elite universities may be sources of much educational rationalist ideology, but are often organizationally primitive (e.g., Oxford, Harvard). The same is true of elite firms and agencies.

All in all, in the modern stateless but globalized world, institutionalist arguments explaining the dramatic rise of cultural models of expanded actorhood show every prospect of continued success. Only in a more stabilized world society would the process of social construction of actor motivations catch up, creating the proper appearance of an apparently realist world society.

Institutionalized models affect the construction of actors

The most conspicuous success of sociological institutional theory has been in the demonstration of powerful effects of institutional models on the construction and modification of actors. Thus national-state structures reflect standard world models,

despite the enormous resource and cultural variability of the world (Meyer et al., 1997). Schools similarly reflect both world and national social forms. And so do firms, and hospitals, and organizations in essentially any other sector (Drori et al., 2006). Furthermore, extant actors of these sorts change over time reflecting changes in institutionalized models.

Now that effects of this sort are widely and routinely recognized in the field, discussion shifts to questions of mechanisms. Institutionalists, convincingly, show that organizational conformity to standard models is widespread and can occur in very routine ways through taken-for-granted understandings. They commonly show the effects of processes such as simple linkage between organizational settings and the wider environments carrying the institutions. Thus, at the nation-state level, world models are adopted more quickly in countries with many non-governmental organizational linkages to world society (Meyer et al., 1997). Similarly, professional linkages facilitate the quick adoption of environmental policies (Frank et al., 2000, call the professions “receptor sites” for the local incorporation of wider rationalized models). At the organizational level, the adoption of fashionable personnel policies is enhanced by having professionalized personnel officers (Dobbin et al., 1993).

Realists try to see processes of coercive power as involved in such relationships, and there are situations in which this is clearly the case. But the rapid social changes we have discussed as globalization continue to generate waves of organizational change that cannot easily be conceived as reflecting straightforward coercive power and control by environments. Wave-like processes are endemic on the modern system (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996), and institutional theories gain much credibility from the obvious empirical situations involved.

Thus with the global rise in conceptions of the nation-state as a development-oriented social actor, university enrollments shot up in every type of country (Schofer & Meyer,

2005). Coercive pressures were clearly not involved – indeed the centers of power in world society (e.g., the United States, the World Bank, or the major corporations) tended initially to be skeptical about the virtues of ‘overeducation’ for impoverished countries. Similarly, global standards of women’s rights tended to produce national reactions quite apart from any coercive forces. And in other areas – like environmental policy, or efforts to build international quality standards – where realists try to discern coercive pressure, empirical analyses tend to be unconvincing.

Contested areas of interpretation, here, revolve around the impact of professional bodies and non-governmental organizations. The sorts of normative pressures produced by these forces can be given something of a realist interpretation. The problem is that the relevant professions and associations are amply represented inside actors, not only outside them. That is, modern national and organizational actors already incorporate in their own authority systems formal representatives of the wider world cultures dealing with the environment, organizational rationalization, human rights, and so on. Modern organizations and national-states appear to be eager to construct themselves as actors, thus incorporating, often wholesale, global standards (for nation-state examples, see McNeely, 1995; or Boli, 1987).

In an expanding and globalizing world society, people and groups everywhere seem to be eager to be actors – this often takes precedence over other goals, and can produce assertions of actor identity far from any actual actor capability. People, in short, may put more effort into being actors than into acting.

We can see this readily in the empirical studies of modern individuals in increasing numbers of countries. They produce opinions and judgments, routinely, in matters they know nothing about. A good American, it seems clear, would produce opinions about whether the United States should invade a country that does not exist. Good organizations have policies about things that never

occur. National states promote world norms with which they have no capacity to conform at home. Agentic actorhood is, in the modern system, a central good (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; Frank & Meyer, 2002).

Some of the intellectual tensions involved here – between a realistic institutionalism and an unrealistic realism – show up in a discussion by Mizruchi and Fein (1999). These researchers, committed to an older realist tradition in the study of organizations, seem puzzled by the extraordinary citation attention continually given to the classic paper by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). So they turn from their normal work as organizational researchers to become sociologists of science (it is often a dangerous business for social scientists to study their own fields), and to investigate the uses of the classic paper. They are disturbed by the fact that few references pick up on the more realist themes in the paper (coercive isomorphism, which can readily be subsumed by realists; and normative isomorphism, which a realist can re-shape into conformity). And all the research emphasis goes to the famous ‘mimetic isomorphism,’ which lies far from the realist track. The reason for this is obvious: any line of interpretation that can be given a realist spin, in modern social science, tends to be given that spin. So institutionalist arguments tend to survive best if they are furthest from realism. Oddly, Mizruchi himself later ends up employing mimetic isomorphism as an explanatory idea (Mizruchi, Stearns, & Marquis, 2006).

The construction of actors is often loosely coupled with practical activity

Sociological institutional theory, in part, arose from the observation that organizational policies and structures are often loosely coupled with practical activity (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; 1978). Given this commonly recognized reality, the question arose – why are the structures and policies there? The question took force from the fact that conventional theories of organizational structure emphasize that, for functional and political reasons, structure is put in place to control activity.

The institutionalist answer is that actor structures, forms, and policies reflect institutional prescriptions and models in the wider environment. Such institutional models make it possible to build great organizations in situations where little actual control is likely or possible – school systems, for instance; or in developing countries national-states.

This line of argument has had much empirical success in the cross-national study of national-states. It is common, now, to discover that nation-states subscribe to human rights standards – but the subscribers are no more likely to implement these standards in practice than are the non-subscribers (Hathaway, 2002; Cole, 2005; Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui, 2005). The same finding holds for research on child labor rates (Abu Sharkh, 2002), and for research on the education of women (Bradley & Ramirez, 1996).

The line of argument has had dramatic empirical success in studies of organizations, too. Brunsson (1985; 1989), develops it as a contrast between policy talk and practical action. He sees a hypocritical inconsistency between the two as a central consequence and requirement for the rationalized society. Thus, inconsistency that to realists is a social problem is to Brunsson a stabilizing solution.

In other work, the line of argument is extended to account for the high frequency of organizational reforms, and the lack of consequences of much reform (Brunsson & Olsen, 1993). If reform is commonly a process of constructing improved actorhood, rather than improved action, the often-noted ‘failure of implementation’ is to be expected. Given the enormously exaggerated models of the proper actor – individuals and organizations alike – characteristic of the modern globalized world, any respectable reform should have excellent prospects for disimplementation.

Despite its obvious uses, the concept of ‘loose coupling’ has been a considerable source of tension in the field. This arises because realist thinking is quite central to modern ideology as well as to much social theory. And from a realist point of view,

decoupling between organizational rules and policies and programs and roles, on the one hand, and local practical action, on the other, is deeply problematic. Rules are created by powerful and interested actors, desiring to control action. They are put in place in particular organizations because the interests of powerful actors demanded it. They should normally be implemented in practice. Only limited realist theory can explain why not. (a) Perhaps the powerful actors creating rules want to deceive the world around them. But if they are so powerful, why would they need to do this? And if they do depend on impressions of others, why are these others so easily deceived? (b) Perhaps particular actors subscribe formally to the rules intending to deceive the powerful forces behind these rules. But if so, why are the powerful forces so easily deceived? (c) Perhaps local participants simply cheat on the organized actor, suboptimally going their own way and violating the rules. If so, why are organized actors so little able to notice?

The extreme tension experienced by realist theorists over the 'loose coupling' notion can be illustrated by the treatment of a renowned initial essay on the subject. Before the rise of new institutional theories, March and his collaborators, working from the 'uncertainty' tradition, produced a precursor. Their essay was called 'A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice' (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972). Instead of working from rational decision models outward to incorporate more uncertainty, this essay started from the frame of decision-making under almost complete uncertainty. The authors illustrated their points with some quickly forgotten simulation models, but the impact of the paper – on a field that had grown a bit deadly – was simply as a strong fundamental theoretical image or metaphor. The paper is much cited, almost entirely for its grounding imagery rather than its specific analytic points.

Interestingly, thirty years later, several researchers committed to the extreme rational choice version of realism, found it necessary to mount a massive attack on this

piece of poetry (Bendor, Moe, & Shotts, 2001). They proved that the illustrative simulation models (which it seems nobody had in fact taken very seriously) were inconsistent with the real arguments of the paper, and made dramatic assertions about this as indicating a fundamental failure of the scientific enterprise involved. (Again, the authors rested the importance of their paper on assertions about the nature of science itself – often a warning sign in the social sciences, e.g., p. 169: 'We evaluate the verbal theory and argue that it fails to create an adequate foundation for scientific progress.')

Institutionalized models impact practices independent of organized actor adoption

In the modern system, institutionalized forces usually diffuse more as cultural waves than through point-to-point diffusion. Thus, standards arise in world discourse, promulgated by professional consensus and associational advocacy. The new emphasis might be, say, on the improved treatment of children with some specific handicaps. National states, of course, adopt appropriate policies with some probability, which might vary depending on their linkage to the world organizations and professions involved.

But of course organizations internal to that state are also immersed in responsible agentic actorhood organized by the global culture. So independent of national policy, schools and medical organizations and professional associations and even some business firms would be likely to notice the new models and incorporate aspects of them. This might depend on their own linkages to world society.

And independent of what policies and programs states and non-state organizations put in place, modern people too tend to be agentic actors immersed in wider society (including global society). So all sorts of local actors – parents, teachers, medical professionals, neighbors, relatives – have some probability of picking up the new world or national story lines, independent of the national state policies or of any organized actor at all.

Realist theories, with very limited conceptions of the embeddedness of actors in wider cultural arrangements, tend to have blind spots on such processes. And for this reason, realist theories – and thus much social scientific theory and ideology – have the greatest difficulty accounting for large-scale modern social change, because such change tends to flow through diffusive waves rather than down through an organized realist ladder of world to state to organization to individual effects. The global expansion of organization (and organization theory) itself is an excellent example (Drori et al., 2006).

The social scientific failures in explaining large-scale change are stunning. The movement for racial and ethnic equality, the women's movement, the environment movement, the modern movements for organizational transparency, the breakdown of the Communist system, the movement for gay and lesbian rights – all these worldwide changes were poorly predicted, and are poorly explained, by social scientific thinking.

Empirically, research on the diffusive impacts of world models on social practice independent of national-state action is convincing. The world models impact national policy, certainly: but they impact practice whether or not they impact policy. The world movement to constrain child labor seems to have very large effects on practice, whether or not countries subscribe to the appropriate prohibitions (Abu Sharkh, 2002). World movements for women's rights have dramatic effects increasing the educational enrollment of women, independent of any national policies (Bradley & Ramirez, 1996). Changed world models related to reproduction impact birth rates independent of national policy (Bongaarts & Watkins, 1996). The world environment movement impacts practice both through national policy and around it (Schofer & Hironaka, 2005). It is probably also true that the world human rights movements have impacted local practice independent of national policy subscriptions – the data on human rights practices

over time are too weakly standardized to tell (Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui, 2005).

Similar studies at the organizational level of analysis show similar effects. Practices in the treatment of employees, for instance, drift along following world or national models in good part independent of formal policies (Drori et al., 2006). In the same way, the practices of teachers or doctors reflect shifting customs in good part independent of organizational policies (Coburn, 2004).

Realist theories have little to say about such broader effects. So sweeping social changes occur, at the edges of social scientific notice. Modern society is organized around general and cultural models, as much as around hard-wired organizational structures. And these models are increasingly worldwide in character (Meyer et al., 1997).

CONCLUSIONS

The rapid expansion of a stateless global society – in transactions and perceptions alike – has produced a great wave of cultural materials facilitating expanding organization at every level. Scientific and rationalistic professionals and associations generate highly rationalized and universalized pictures of natural and social environments calling for expanded rational actorhood of states, organizations, and individuals. Legal and social scientific professionals generate greatly expanded conceptions of the rights and capabilities of all human persons, transcending national citizenship. Universities and other educational arrangements expand, worldwide, installing newly rationalized knowledge in newly empowered persons.

So models of organized actorhood expand, penetrate every social sector and country. All sorts of older social forms – bureaucracies, family structures, traditional professional arrangements – are transformed into organizations. The process is driven by a cultural system that is a putative substitute for

traditional state-like political arrangements – realist analyses that root the process in powerful interested actors miss out on most of the important changes. The process spreads through the diffusion of models of actorhood, not principally via a power and incentive system. The changes transcend practicality, leaving great gaps between policy and practice essentially everywhere – almost any organization can be seen as a failure, now. And the changes diffuse at multiple levels – through central organizations and through their professionalized memberships and populations.

Sociological institutional theory – especially its phenomenological version – captures the whole post-World War II enterprise very well, and for this reason has been successful. In a world less rapidly changing, the preferred realisms of modern ideology and social theory might have constructed realist explanations but change has been too rapid. Realist theories and ideologies have not caught up with the explosion of human rights (e.g., gay and lesbian rights), of environmental doctrines and policies, of all sorts of social rationalization (e.g., a global standards movement), and the transformation of all sorts of unlikely social structures into putatively rational organizations.

Much social theory, however, retains its theoretical/ideological preference for traditional realisms, leaving the great social changes of the modern period poorly explored. So this leaves much intellectual space within which institutional theory can develop. In this context, the best strategy for institutional theory is to keep to its last, and to avoid attending to the clamor arising from realist ideological assumptions.

Thus, institutionalists sometimes are instructed to seek for the interested actors behind the new social models under construction, and to assume such actors exist by definition. This is not a good idea, and it makes more sense to track the relevant professions and ‘others’ who are central. Most new models of organizational or national structure are developed with heavy influence

from such sources. Naturally, successful models tend to be derived and edited from the most successful organizations – which realists then call hegemonic – but this does not mean that the interests of those organizations play a causal role.

Institutionalists are instructed to investigate the realist ‘mechanisms’ by which local structures conform to wider models: it is not a good idea to take seriously the pretenses of modern interested actorhood involved. Conformity to standard models may not involve much ‘influence’ or much decision-making. The relevant network linkages, for example, may simply involve the most elementary forms of information transmission.

Institutionalists are told to investigate the assumed true linkages that powerful interested actors put between policy and practice: it is wiser to imagine that developing the posture of the proper actor is a main goal of modern people and groups, transcending their needs to implement this posture in actions. In a world in which an enormous premium is placed on actorhood, entering into this identity is obviously central.

Institutionalists are told that the analysis of diffusion waves is unscientific – the only correct approach is to assume each particle in such a wave is a properly rational and interested actor: following this advice would mean giving up on really trying to explain the dramatic social and organizational changes of our period. The great changes of our period – often poorly recognized by realist social sciences – occur much more through waves of conforming non-decision than through networks of fully formed and autonomous rationalized actors.

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