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The Development and Application
of Sociological Neoinstitutionalism

RONALD L. JEPPELSON

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Jepperson: *The Development and Application of Sociological Neoinstitutionalism*

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**ROBERT SCHUMAN CENTRE
FOR ADVANCED STUDIES**

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of Sociological Neoinstitutionalism**

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University of Tulsa

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This Working Paper has been written in the context of the 1999-2000 European Forum programme on "Between Europe and the Nation State: the Reshaping of Interests, Identities and Political Representation" directed by Professors Stefano Bartolini (EUI, SPS Department), Thomas Risse (EUI, RSC/SPS Joint Chair) and Bo Stråth (EUI, RSC/HEC Joint Chair).

The Forum reflects on the domestic impact of European integration, studying the extent to which *Europeanisation* shapes the adaptation patterns, power redistribution, and shifting loyalties at the national level. The categories of 'interest' and 'identity' are at the core of the programme and a particular emphasis is given to the formation of new social identities, the redefinition of corporate interests, and the domestic changes in the forms of political representation.

INTRODUCTION*

Sociological neoinstitutionalism is one of the most broad-ranging “theoretical research programs” (TRPs) in contemporary sociology and one of the most empirically developed forms of institutional analysis. This program, centered around the work of John W. Meyer and his collaborators (but now extending beyond this group), has produced an integrated and extensive body of research about the nation-states, individuals, and organizational structures of modern society. The central concern of this institutionalism is the embeddedness of social structures and social “actors” in broad-scale contexts of meaning: more specifically, the consequences of European and later world culture for social organization (Meyer, Boli, and Thomas 1987:31).

This institutionalism originated in a set of theoretical papers in the 1970s by Meyer, and in concurrent research in the sociology of education, where the program has remained central. The program expanded into full-blown research efforts concerning organizations, the world system, and individual identity. Applications continue to proliferate. For instance, this institutionalism now supports one of the most extensive lines of research on current “globalization” — for example, John Boli and George Thomas’ work on the extraordinary recent increase in international non-governmental organizations (Boli and Thomas 1997) — as well as new efforts on collective identity, sexuality, law, and for that matter even accounting. These efforts are now found across the sociological community at many of its major research sites.

This paper surveys and analyzes the development of this TRP. It explicates its intellectual core, surveys its inter-related applications in different substantive domains, and analyzes the growth of these applications over time (including the role of exchanges with other lines of theory and research in this growth).¹ The primary concern is how this institutionalism has been used to generate substantive insights — that is, both new observations and new explanations of the social world.²

* A shorter version of this paper is forthcoming in *New Directions in Sociological Theory: The Growth of Contemporary Theories*, edited by Joseph Berger & Morris Zelditch, Jr. (Rowman & Littlefield). The author draws upon recent conversations or correspondence with Joseph Berger, John Boli, John Meyer, Thomas Risse, Marc Ventresca, and Morris Zelditch. Meyer endured multiple queries about the research program during the preparation of this paper, and Boli provided repeated commentary. The author appreciates the support of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies.

INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

Meyer worked out a number of the core theoretical ideas by 1970.³ A set of fundamental papers, developing and consolidating main ideas, appeared in print between 1977 and 1980: on the “effects of education as an institution” (Meyer 1977), on “institutionalized organizations” (with Brian Rowan [Meyer and Rowan 1977]), and on “the world polity and the authority of the nation-state” (Meyer 1980).⁴

In developing his ideas, Meyer was reacting to the enduring individualism of American sociology, the manifest empirical difficulties of its associated “action” and “socialization” theories (including Talcott Parsons’ variant, emphasizing action guided by internalized norms), and the persistent attempt by much American social theory especially to analyze modern society as a “society without culture” (Meyer 1988).⁵ Asked to characterize the development of his thinking, in an interview in *Soziologie und Wirtschaft* (Krücken 2000), Meyer indicates that he did not think of society as fundamentally constituted by “actors,” or of people or structures as primarily actors. He “...took less seriously the actorhood of individuals than American sociologists would normally do” (ibid.:58): “I did not think individuals were the fundamental units of society, nor did I think they were tightly organized ‘hard-wired’ structures. I thought society was made up of knowledge and culture” (Meyer 1999b). Accordingly, in his work (the interview continues), Meyer tried to reconceptualize the sociology of education to “give it a less individualistic picture. It is less a matter of socializing raw individuals, but more about labeling, credentialing, and creating categories — more institutional in a word... . In organization theory, I did the same, and also in my work on the nation state, which I see as structures embedded in a broader meaning system and less as autonomous actors” (Meyer in Krücken 2000:58).

By seeing society as institutionalized “knowledge and culture,” Meyer (then others) work from an analytical imagery as basic as the actor-and-interest imagery of more conventional sociology: namely, the “construction” of structures and actors within broad institutional frameworks, and the cultural “scripting” of much activity within these frameworks. By focusing upon the broad institutional frameworks of society (including world society), sociological neoinstitutionalism then *defocalizes* “actors” *on purpose*. The whole point of this TRP is to find out what can be gained by seeing actors (and interests and structures and activity) as in many respects derivative from institutions and culture. This idea is pursued in order to envision features of the social world not easily captured – or not captured at all — when focusing upon actors (Meyer and Jepserson 2000).

A clear research agenda has followed from this intellectual thrust. There is a background historical argument about the evolution of modern society within the institutional matrices and cultural schemas provided by Christendom (see Meyer 1989; Meyer, Boli, and Thomas 1987; Meyer and Jepperson 2000). There is an additional background argument about the long-term reconstruction of modern society around a world system of national states, the latter units constituted as societies of organizations and of citizen-individuals. The three main research clusters of the program then follow directly. National states are seen as embedded in a world polity and culture, and the common cultural contents and trends of these states are sought. Organizations are seen as embedded in national (and increasingly world) institutional environments, and their externally-institutionalized features are sought. People are seen as enacting elaborate doctrines of individualism, rather than acting in some more generic fashion; these doctrines have both world cultural sources and distinctive national variations, and both are studied. In each research area, many basic features of the entities examined — national states, organizations, individuals — are shown to be constructions of institutionalized cultural environments, rather than being “hardwired” and pre-given outside the social system.

TWO BACKGROUND THEORETICAL ARGUMENTS: AN INTRODUCTION VIA THE SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Questioning the Role of the “Socialization” in Producing and Reproducing Social Order

The American sociology of education of the 1950s and ‘60s – and American sociology generally — tended to assume a picture of society as made up of and produced by highly socialized individuals, the educational system then central in the reproduction of society in large part via its socializing activities. But empirical studies presented anomalies for this theoretical picture. Notably, many studies showed small “socializing” effects of American colleges on student attitudes, and only small differences in these effects across colleges, despite the big differences among colleges. Studies of medical schools found it difficult to isolate much “socialization,” but did incidentally pick up dramatic shifts from medical students thinking of themselves as merely students to thinking of themselves as doctors.

In reflecting upon these results, and in conducting research on student college and occupational choices (e.g., Meyer 1970a), Meyer and colleagues developed the following interpretation (reflected in Meyer 1970a, 1972, 1977 and Kamens 1977). Seen as institutions, what schools do primarily is produce graduates and bestow the identity “graduate.” If the social status and role of

graduates in society is largely the same — as is the case in egalitarian American society, but not in many more status-stratified European ones — then the schools will largely have similar effects on individuals, because individuals are enacting a largely singular identity. (In Germany, in contrast, there are more differentiated categories of “graduate,” and hence different identities [and attitudes] for individuals to enact.)⁶ Relatedly, medical schools confer the identity “doctor”: medical students learn they are doctors and people in the social environment learn this too, and these are large effects. David Kamens added the fundamental observation that schools develop formal structures that dramatize their advertised effects on students (Kamens 1977). For example, colleges emphasize their selectivity, or their “residential education,” or their putatively rigorous requirements. In so doing schools “create and validate myths” concerning both the college experience and “the intrinsic qualities that their graduates possess” [Kamens 1977:208].

Two basic theoretical points are reflected here. First, the truly fundamental “socialization” is the construction and certification (the “chartering”) of identities (Meyer 1970c), and this particular socialization can occur without any especially deep or common inculcation of values or attitudes (or knowledge, for that matter). Second, the “socialization” is as much of *others* in the social environment as of those directly involved in an institution: for instance, the medical profession teaches others about the identity “doctor” as well as medical students; colleges teach others about their graduates. In a word, the socialization is “diffuse” as well as direct (Meyer 1970c).

In making these arguments, this institutionalism was one of a number of lines of thought emerging in opposition to Talcott Parsons’ and Robert Merton’s emphasis on the internalization of “norms” as the foundation of social order. Instead, the “phenomenological” counterargument (shared by and developed within this institutionalism) was more cognitive and collective in character, in two respects. First, the fundamental “socialization” according to phenomenological sociology is the learning of broad collective representations of society – pictures of what society is and how it works — and the acceptance of these pictures as social facts. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann referred to learning “recipe knowledge” about the social system, and about being inculcated into a “symbolic universe” (1967); Meyer referred to learning about “symbols” (like the general symbol “school”), or to learning basic “myths” (i.e., broad cultural accounts) of society (Meyer 1970b, 1977). People learn highly abstract and symbolic accounts of society more than detailed empirical information; hence this learning coincides with people’s well-known low levels of actual information about their social environment, even about matters of substantial import to them (such as schooling or job markets or marriage networks).

Second, the causality of social rules and “myths,” argued Meyer, inheres “not in the fact that individuals believe them, but in the fact that they ‘know’ everyone else does...” (Meyer 1977:75). That is, the truly fundamental beliefs for reproducing a social order are people’s beliefs about *others’* behavior and beliefs; the basic “myths” of society operate primarily by establishing beliefs about what others think and expectations about how others will behave. Further, in this phenomenological line of argument, social order depends more upon the degree to which the basic myths of the system are taken-for-granted — accepted as realities, grounded in common expectations — than upon personal belief in them (Meyer 1977:65, Meyer 1970b).⁷ In clarifying this point (and a number of related ones), Morris Zelditch distinguished between the *validation* of myths versus the *endorsement* of them (Zelditch 1984; Zelditch and Walker 1984): social order, contra Parsons and Merton, depends more on the degree of validation of collective reality — the pragmatic acceptance of rules and accounts as in place and binding — than upon the endorsement of it. This point has remained fundamental to institutionalism as it has developed.

Elaborating the Nature and Effects of Institutionalization

In the 1970s, scholars in the sociology of education were considering how education worked to “reproduce” societies over time. Addressing this issue, Meyer developed the argument that the educational system embodies a “theory of knowledge and personnel” of society, as well as socializing individuals and channeling them to social positions. That is, it is a primary institutional location for consolidating the knowledge system of society, and for defining and legitimating the specific identities of both elites and democratic citizens (Meyer 1972, 1977). Changes in educational curricula end up “restructur[ing] whole populations” by creating new categories of authoritative knowledge and then entirely new roles (new professions, new elites, new ideas about citizenship) (Meyer 1977:55). “Not only new types of persons but also new competencies are authoritatively created” by education as an evolving institution (ibid.: 56). For example, the field of demography was codified within the education system, subsequently chartering and producing demographers, and eventually enabling and encouraging population control policies (Barrett 1995; Barrett and Frank 1999). In a formula, “institutionalized demography creates demographers, and makes demographic control reasonable,”⁸ that is, legitimate and conventional.

Note that the causal connections posited in this example are *collective-level* and *cultural* in nature — they feature processes occurring within and between institutions (within the educational system, broadly considered, and between the educational system, professions, and the state). These processes are of course produced via the behavior of people, *but* (in this example): (1) the

people implicated are various educators and scholars and state elites, hence occupants of highly institutionally-constructed roles, operating more in their cultural and professional capacities — that is, as *agents* of the cultural system — than as generic individual “actors” bearing only simple or private interests. Also, (2) the causal linkages involved in these collective processes are far removed from the aggregation of simple social behavior, or from individual socialization and its aggregate effects, or even from the social network processes presented in educational stratification arguments. Attention to collective-level and cultural processes is the main distinguishing feature of this institutionalism, as we’ll see.

ORGANIZATIONS IN INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENTS⁹

Background: Questioning the Integration and Boundedness of Organizations

The institutionalist contribution to organizational analysis followed directly from the 1970s research on school organizations,¹⁰ as well as from research on evaluation processes in organizations by W.R. Scott and Sanford Dornbusch (Dornbusch and Scott 1975), and from Scott’s research on health care organizations. Meyer and Brian Rowan (1977) argued that schools survive in the first instance not because of tight organizational controls — or because of any particular effectiveness in schooling — but because of conformity with highly institutionalized categories and myths in the broader society (the basic idea of what a school is, or what mathematics is, or what “2nd grade” is). The emergent institutionalist idea was that these features might be general characteristics of organizations, at least far more so than generally acknowledged. Sociological neoinstitutionalism was “but one of several theories that developed in reaction to prevailing conceptions of organizations as bounded, relatively autonomous, rational actors” (Scott and Meyer 1994:1). As in other application areas, the institutionalist effort was to question the assumed naturalness of organizations, seeing them instead as “(a) connected to and (b) constructed by wide social environments” (Meyer and Scott 1992:1), as opposed to being prior realities external to the cultural system (Meyer, Boli, and Thomas 1987:22).

Three Core Ideas About Formal Organizing

In developing this line of argument, a starting idea was that the *building blocks* for formal organization were institutionally constructed and were “littered around the societal landscape” (Meyer and Rowan 1977:345). More specifically, the ongoing “rationalization”¹¹ of social life creates new organizational elements, and new social nodes around which formal organizations can form. Meyer and Rowan gave the following examples: the development of psychology certifies new professionals and creates new specialized agencies and departments; the

expansion of professional research stimulates R&D units within organizations; the movement of sexuality into the public sphere new therapies and their associated organizations (ibid.:344). This rationalization has been a continuing process: “A wider range of purposes and activities becomes legitimate grounds for organizing: child care; leisure activities and recreation; even finding a compatible marriage partner” (Scott and Meyer 1994:114).¹²

A second core idea, also in Meyer and Rowan (1977), was that “the formal structures of many organizations in postindustrial society...dramatically reflect the myths of their institutional environments instead of the demands of their work activities” (p. 341). By “formal structure” the authors referred to a “blueprint for activities,” including the table of organization and an organization’s explicit goals and policies (p. 342). Formal structure is in many respects “ceremonial” in function: it often demonstrates adherence with currently predominant myths (i.e., cultural models) – including, in postindustrial environments, myths of rationality. Such adherence “signals rationality” to internal and external groups, and hence can enhance internal and external legitimacy, access to resources, and ultimately organizational survival (pp. 352-353, 355; also Scott and Meyer 1994:115).

Third, Meyer and Rowan (and then Meyer and Scott) stressed one particular structural consequence of the linkage of organizational elements to broad institutional structures. This linkage produces organizational forms that are often “sprawling” — loosely integrated and variously “decoupled.” Formal structure and rules are often decoupled from actual activities; programs are often decoupled from organizational outcomes; internal organizational sectors are often decoupled from one another; and organizational decision-making activity is often decoupled from actual organizational action (e.g., Meyer 1983/1992:239; Brunsson 1989). The decoupling of formal and informal activity was long-observed in the organizational literature; this institutionalism now offered a more general explanation of it and made the observation central. “Stable organizing requires and results from external legitimation and may be quite consistent with a good deal of internal looseness” (Scott and Meyer 1994:2).

Different Types of Organizations

In contextualizing their arguments, Meyer and Rowan provided two reasons to think that institutional effects on organizations should be ubiquitous. First, they argued that the “rise of collectively organized society” had “eroded many market contexts,” thus expanding the range of organizations subject directly to institutional forces (1977:354). Second, they added that even “[o]rganizations producing in markets that place great emphasis on efficiency build in units whose

relation to production is obscure and whose efficiency is determined, not by true production functions, but by ceremonial definition" (ibid.:353).

Later, Scott (1987:126) and Scott and Meyer (1991:122-124) began to distinguish different sorts of institutional effects on organizations. In order to do so, they distinguished stronger and weaker "technical environments" from stronger and weaker "institutional environments": some organizations are subject to strong versions of both (utilities, banks), some weak versions of both (restaurants, health clubs), and some exist in one of two mixed patterns (e.g., general manufacturing organizations exist in a weaker institutional but stronger technical environment, while schools and mental health clinics exist in a weaker technical but stronger institutional environment). With this classification of environments at hand, Scott and Meyer, and independently Lynne Zucker, presented arguments about the conjoint effects of the varying environments on different sorts of organizations, concentrating upon variations in organizational structures and on patterns of success and failure (Scott and Meyer 1991, Zucker 1983, Zucker 1987).

An Elaboration: the Institutional Construction of the "Ground Rules of Economic Life"

These institutionalists insisted that even markets themselves are highly "institutionally constructed": thinking for example of all the legal, political, and social definitions involved in the coevolution of American society and the automobile market. This emphasis is not distinctive to this institutionalism but rather follows a general institutionalism going back to Max Weber. Recently this particular literature has begun to elaborate the idea of the institutional construction of "organizational fields," strategies, and doctrines (reviewed by Dobbin 1994a). First, scholars have pursued the "interdependence of state regulatory policies, organizational fields, and management strategies" (Scott 1995:99). In a formidable piece of research, Neil Fligstein studied the evolution of the largest American firms from the 1800s to the present (Fligstein 1990). Among other things, he found (in Frank Dobbin's admirable epitomization) that "the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 made mergers the favored business strategy at the dawn of the 20th century *and* popularized a new theory of the firm that reinforced horizontal integration. Then after World War II, the Celler-Kefauver Act, amending Sherman, made diversification the favored American business strategy *and* helped to popularize finance management and portfolio theory" (Dobbin 1995:280, emphasis added).

Dobbin has stressed the theoretical implication of this line of work: the economic environment, far from being generic or natural, is partly constituted and reconstituted by public policies and ideologies (Dobbin 1994b, 1995). Public policies alter “the ground rules of economic life” (ibid.). New business strategies emerge under each policy regime, and eventually new theories emerge justifying the efficiency of the new strategies. Drawing upon his own historical and comparative research (Dobbin 1994b), Dobbin asks: “How did Americans arrive at the conclusion that rivalistic state mercantilism was the most effective means to growth? How did they come to believe that approach was wrong, and support cartels? How did they decide to crush cartels and enforce price competition?” (Dobbin 1995:282) Dobbin’s answer (in brief) is that Americans altered earlier policies when the policies came into perceived conflict with institutionalized precepts of American democracy – especially the opposition to concentrated power. So, when new forms of concentrated power were perceived, reform efforts ensued and the rules of the game were eventually changed. After some further lag, economic doctrines adjusted to find the changed rules to be efficient (Dobbin 1995:301; 1994b). The institutionalist point: even the principles of rational organizing are themselves socially constructed and reconstructed.

Effects of Variation in Institutional Environments (1): Cross-national Variation

If formal organizing is interpenetrated with institutional environments, it follows that different institutional environments will construct different sorts of formal organizations. Most of the initial institutionalist research was U.S.-centric, the primary exception being study of cross-national variation in educational organizations. In 1983 Meyer offered an explicit comparative framework, contrasting “statist,” “corporatist,” and “individualist” variants of modern institutional environments (and associating the historical trajectories of France, Germany, and the U.S. with these variants) [Meyer 1983b]. He then linked this institutional variation to variation in the amounts, types, and structure of formal organizing, in a set of propositions. For example, Meyer argued that statist environments (such as France) are likely to suppress formal organizing relative to other environments, and to construct organizational structures that are simpler, more highly formalized, and sharply bounded (Meyer 1983b:276-277). Individualist environments (notably the U.S.) are likely to produce more formal organizing, with the organizations showing more formal structure, weaker boundaries, more functions, and (accordingly) less formal rationality than organizations elsewhere (ibid. pp. 275-276). Elaborating this analysis, Jepperson and Meyer (1991) drew upon the existing empirical literature on cross-national variation in organizations, and pointed out that this variation does appear to cluster by polity types. In an extensive research program on organizational

variations in East Asia, Gary Hamilton and colleagues developed broadly parallel arguments. They found that the institutionalization of different models of authority powerfully affected the kinds of economic organizations that emerged in different countries (e.g., Hamilton and Biggart 1988; Orrù, Biggart, and Hamilton 1991). Despite the obvious import of this area of work, research on cross-national organizational variation within this institutionalism, testing and developing such ideas, has only recently begun to expand.¹³

Effects of Institutional Variation (2): Variation over Time

If formal organizing is interpenetrated with institutional environments, it also follows that changes in institutional environments will lead to changes in formal organizing. Here more work has been done – again, with most reference to the U.S. — organized around three sets of observations.

First, Meyer, Scott, and colleagues have focused upon the recent (post-1950s) and rapid institutional centralization in the U.S. (a centralization that remains “fragmented” in character when compared to the more statist systems). A correlate is that organizations are increasingly embedded in systems having a vertical structure, “with decisions about funding and goals more highly centralized and more formally structured today than in the past” (Scott and Meyer 1983/1992:150). One consequence is a “*trend toward societal sectoralization*”: the formation of “functionally differentiated sectors whose structures are vertically connected with lines stretching up to the central nation-state” (Scott and Meyer 1983/1992:150). Because of the continued fragmentation of this institutional environment (for instance, many governmental agencies at many levels, many professional authorities), administrative structures become more complex and elaborate (Scott and Meyer 1994:117 and section II). A consequence: many organizational systems are now “better viewed as loosely related collections of roles and units whose purposes and procedures come from a variety of external sources, not a unitary internal superior” (ibid.:117).

Second, the ongoing rationalization of social structure around formal organizations – creating “societies of organizations” everywhere (Perrow 1991, Coleman 1974) – has also led to the *increasing standardization* of formal organizing. Organizations are now socially *depicted* as instances of formal organization rather than more specifically as schools or factories or hospitals (Meyer 1994a:44). “[O]ne can discuss proper organization without much mentioning the actual substantive activities the organization will do.” Standardized management accompanies standardized organizations: “An older world in which schools were managed by educators, hospitals by doctors, railroads by railroad men now recedes into quaintness. All these things are now

seen as organizations, and a worldwide discourse instructs on the conduct of organization” (ibid.).

Third, the increasingly *expanded individualism* of contemporary societies “creates organizational work” (Scott and Meyer 1994:211 and Section III). Organizations must deal with people carrying far more complex “educational, occupational, and psychological properties” (Scott and Meyer 1994:209). Existing organizations expand their structures to accommodate them: including, developing structures of “organizational citizenship,” such as due process and grievance mechanisms and affirmative action (and programs of employee “development”) (Dobbin et al. 1988). New categories of organizations arise to “create and modify individuals”: new schooling, therapeutic, counseling, physical health, religious, and cultural organizations (Scott and Meyer 1994:211). Further, expanded individualism contributes to the *de-bureaucratization* of organizations: true bureaucracies and many tight systems of technical control (e.g., Taylorist ones) decline – so that over time, fewer people actually give and receive orders (ibid.:212).

Linkages between Institutional Environments and Organizations

Meyer and Rowan (1977), Meyer, Scott, and Deal (1981), and Scott and Meyer (1983) discussed a wide range of processes linking institutional environments and organizations, although these were not especially highlighted or typologized. In 1983 Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell presented such a typology in an influential analysis that helped to secure the standing of institutionalism as a main approach to organizational analysis (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).¹⁴ Reviewing the literature, they asserted that “organizational isomorphism” – similarities of form and structure — can occur due to coercive processes (rooted in political control and in legitimacy-seeking), mimetic processes (rooted in the development of standard responses to uncertainty), and normative processes (rooted especially in professionalization). They then developed a number of propositions about organizational isomorphism and change, referring to these processes, and in addition discussed how these processes related to ones highlighted by other schools of organizational analysis. The typology has subsequently been generalized in a fundamental way by Scott (1995), in an analysis that has yet to take proper hold in the literature.¹⁵

David Strang and Meyer later added a general point specifically about the diffusion of organizational forms and practices: that the highly theorized nature of contemporary societies tends to heighten greatly the diffusion of organizational forms and practices (Strang and Meyer 1993). Strang gives the example of the prominent, rapid, and highly theorized diffusion of (perceived) Japanese

organizational practices in the U.S. context (Strang 1994). Meyer and Scott discuss the earlier diffusion and conventionalization of modern personnel administration (Meyer and Scott 1992:1-2) in this connection.¹⁶ In highly institutionalized (and theorized) environments, policies and programs tend to evolve and change in a highly “contextual” way. That is, reform ideas emerge and evolve within a dense (national, increasingly world) policy culture; local organizations sample from this culture in an often haphazard and decoupled fashion.¹⁷

Endnote

This institutionalism paints a picture of a “society of organizations,” but not of autonomous and bounded ones: “Although organizations may have absorbed society, as Perrow claims, society has not less absorbed organizations” (Scott and Meyer 1994:4). In fact, this institutionalism has come to picture organizations as sufficiently interpenetrated with institutional environments, such that, analytically speaking, “organizations tend to disappear as distinct and bounded units” (Meyer and Rowan 1977:346).

NATION-STATES IN A WORLD POLITY AND CULTURE¹⁸

Background: Questioning “Modernization” — and the Hard Reality of States

Some of the same issues were eventually raised about states in the world system. In this research area, Meyer and Michael Hannan and their collaborators¹⁹ in the 1970s were curious about the claims of a then highly conventionalized theory of societal “modernization.” The research group was aware of a seemingly extreme gap between the strong claims of this literature, and a lack of serious evidence – in two senses. First, in scholarship, the empirical literature was very primitive, consisting largely of a cross-sectional (i.e., not longitudinal) correlational literature, plus scattered case studies. Second, in the world, scholars and advisors and elites from core-countries were encouraging more peripheral states to do things like expand education systems to mimic American or European ones – without basing such recommendations upon any plausible evidence. Hence both the research and the reality seemed highly ideological.

Thus motivated, the research group assembled available quantitative data on country characteristics in a “panel” format (that is, for many countries at regularly-spaced time points) — such data had not been much assembled and analyzed, to the group’s surprise — as well as coding additional cross-national material to create new measures.²⁰ As ideas and research designs consolidated, the group begin to focus upon direct institution-to-institution connections within

the world system – that is, the specific inter-relations of political, educational, and economic structures and outcomes (ibid.:5-6).²¹

The initial wave of research produced numerous findings (the studies were collected in Meyer and Hannan 1979), but the overall patterns of particular interest for institutionalism were the following. First, the research documented an “explosive expansion of national systems of education”; the sources of this expansion appeared “to lie outside the properties of particular countries and to reflect exigencies of global social organization whose logics and purposes are built into almost all states” (ibid.:13-14). Second, in parallel fashion “[s]tates tend to expand their power and authority within society in all types of countries through the modern period” (ibid.:14). Third, in general, “[t]he world as a whole [during 1950-1970] shows increasing structural *similarities of form* among societies without, however, showing increasing *equalities of outcome* among societies” (ibid.:15). The authors noted that this pattern may be “quite specific to a period of great economic expansion and extension of markets...” and that “[a] period of sustained world-wide economic contraction or a long-term stabilization, might alter the picture considerably” (ibid.:15).

To take a specific example, the studies of educational systems and curricula showed that both were changing substantially over time, but in a very similar way across countries: there was truly remarkable “isomorphism” [Meyer, Ramirez, and Boli-Bennett 1977; Ramirez and Rubinson 1979; Meyer and Ramirez 1981]. This pattern presented a major anomaly (if initially a little-noticed one) for the sociology of education, which was functionalist²² in its basic theoretical imagery. In a functionalist scheme, educational structures should have clear political or economic functions; hence, the large national economic and political variations of societies should be accompanied by big educational variations (since the educational and politico-economic variations should be adaptations to and facilitators of one another). Empirically, however, this covariation was not present: educational systems were more and more alike.

The interpretation that emerged, only fully consolidated after an extended period of work, was the following. It appeared that education was being constructed more for an *imagined* society than for real societies (at least in the post-WWII period of educational expansion). This argument reflects the general institutionalist idea that people in modern societies are constantly developing, redeveloping, and enacting *models* of society: modern social worlds are highly theorized, hence “imagined.”²³ Further — a crucial point — while actual societies are very different, it appears that imagined societies are pretty much alike (at least for those countries with some connection to world institutions). So, the education seen as appropriate for world-imagined society is quite

standardized: models of both imagined society and education appear to change over time at a (nearly) world level.²⁴ In fact, educational curricula are now explicitly organized around ideas of a global society and culture, and ideas of a globally standard individual (Meyer, Kamens, and Benavot 1992; McEneaney and Meyer 2000, Meyer and Ramirez 2000, Meyer 2000a).

A “World Polity” and World Culture as well as a World Economy

During the same period, other scholars had also broached ideas of a broad “world system.” Immanuel Wallerstein had initiated his pioneering historical studies of a world economy and stratification system (Wallerstein 1974), Charles Tilly and colleagues had initiated long-term studies of the development of European states (Tilly 1975), and a separate literature on economic “dependency” had posited effects of world network positioning on developmental paths. The distinctive institutionalist intervention, worked out in conjunction with the above-sketched research, was the argument that the world system was not limited to a world economy or geomilitary system. The world system also comprised a world “polity” and world culture – institutional features originating in Christendom. Further, Meyer and collaborators called particular attention to the specific configuration of the “modern world system”: a “relatively unified cultural system and a densely linked economy [...] without a centralized political system” (Meyer and Hannan 1979:298; also Meyer, Boli, and Thomas 1981). This configuration was highlighted as a cause of many of features of modern social and political development, as we will see.

By 1980, pressing his theoretical line, Meyer wished to qualify and contextualize Wallerstein’s account of the Western state system, primarily by reminding that the “Western state also developed in part as a project under the aegis of the now invisible universal Western Church and was legitimated by broad cultural mechanisms” (Thomas and Meyer 1984:470). “All the European societies in the modern period were deeply embedded, not only in a world commodity economy and system of exchange, but also in a constructed world collectivity – a society and a stateless polity... .” (Meyer 1981:899). In a review of Wallerstein’s second volume of *The Modern World System*, Meyer argued that a number of features of the modern world could not be well accounted for without invoking this “wider cultural polity.” To give the flavor of the argument:

The presence of this wider evolving culture provided a legitimating base for the unusual world Wallerstein writes about. It is a world in which long-distance exchange makes sense and can properly be incorporated and adapted to, in which such exchange can be extended to the furthest strange lands with which one has no direct political linkage, in which techniques are of general utility and can be copied, in which rationalized social structures and policies are not only competed with but quickly copied, in which the

nominally ultimate state political authorities are legitimately seen as subordinate to wider purposes, in which these purposes are shared across units, and in which a shared orientation integrates disparate desiderata into a single value standard (monetarization) across units (international currency) (Meyer 1982:266).

The Embedding of Nation-states within a World Polity

The core ideas about a “wider cultural polity” were not deployed historically, however, but rather directed to the contemporary period. They were developed by Meyer in his paper on “the world polity and the authority of the nation-state” (Meyer 1980). Following the general institutionalist imagery, Meyer presented nation-states as “embedded in an exogenous, and more or less worldwide, rationalistic culture” (1999:123), a culture “located in many world institutions (in “interstate relations, lending agencies, world cultural elite definitions and organizations, transnational bodies” [Meyer 1980:117]). In particular, this culture was composed of “world definitions of the justifications, perspectives, purposes, and policies properly to be pursued by nation-state organizations” (ibid.:120).²⁵

Without invoking this world polity, Meyer argued, it seemed impossible to account for a number of basic features of the system of nation-states. First, its very existence: there is far more similarity in political forms in the world than one would expect if one attends primarily to the great differences in economic development and internal cultures.²⁶ And there is far more stability in forms than one would anticipate: the nation-state form has been a sticky one (Strang 1990).

Second, state structures and policy domains have continued to expand rapidly over time, and notably in formally similar ways across countries. More and more countries have more of the same ministries and the same broad policy programs. This “isomorphic expansion” has occurred even in the peripheries — if in a pronounced “decoupled” way in these zones. (Peripheral countries often adopt currently common ministries and plans, without implementing actual policies.)²⁷ All this standardization appears to develop within and be propelled by trans-country discourses and organizations – for example, in what have now been labeled as “epistemic communities” (scientific and professional), “advocacy networks,” and international governmental and nongovernmental organizations.

The Long-term Buildup of a “World Society” Carrying “Models” of Political Form and Responsibility

In reflecting upon the initial wave of research collected in Meyer and Hannan (1979), the authors noted a methodological limitation of their studies: that “[s]imple panel analyses of the relationships among features of national societies provide no information on larger system processes affecting *all* subunits. ... This takes us in the direction, not of causal comparative analysis (for we really have but one case evolving over time), but toward historical description and time series analysis” in order to “attempt to describe features of the whole system” over a longer period of time (ibid.:12-13, 298). As research efforts continued, various scholars developed these research designs during the 1980s and ‘90s.²⁸

Some studies tracked the consolidation of the nation-state form itself: for instance, David Strang studied the decline in dependent and external territories in the world system, and showed that once units become sovereign states, they rarely exit that form (Strang 1990). Other scholars documented the consolidation of a basic formal model of a nation-state, seeing such a model reflected in formal applications for UN membership (McNeely 1995), in the development of standardized data systems across countries (ibid.), and in the development of more standard population censuses (Ventresca 1995). Increasing commonality in state activities and policies was clearly documented in various longitudinal research: commonality in (among other areas) science policies (Finnemore 1996b), welfare policies (Strang and Chang 1993), population control ideas (Barrett 1995), women’s rights (Berkovitch 1999a, 1999b), environmental policy (Frank 1997, Meyer et al. 1997). Common changes in national membership and citizenship models was found as well: apparent in constitutional rights (Boli 1987a), and in the changing status accorded to women, ethnoracial minorities, sexual minorities, and labor migrants (e.g., Ramirez and Cha 1990, Bradley and Ramirez 1996, Frank and McEneaney 1999, Soysal 1994).

As this research consolidated, Meyer, John Boli, George Thomas, and Francisco Ramirez integrated the findings via a tightened theoretical argument, focusing upon the idea of a “world society,” and specifically upon the idea that “[m]any features of the contemporary nation-state derive from *worldwide models* constructed and propagated through global cultural and associational processes” (Meyer et al. 1997:144-145, emphasis added). These processes have intensified in part due to the continuing “statelessness” of the world system, a background cause once again invoked (ibid.:145). This configuration continues to generate an extensive trans-national elaboration of collective agendas — within international organizations, scientific communities, and professions — agendas worked out for nation-state actors. Scientific, professional, and other international

nongovernmental organizations have been institutionalized worldwide (documented and studied in Boli and Thomas 1997 and 1999), as have global consulting industries of various sorts, promoting recipes for economic, political, organizational, and individual development (Meyer 2000b). In this connection, Strang and Meyer argued that the culture of this world system provides substantial impetus for extensive diffusion of ideas, given its underlying assumptions of the ultimate similarity of societies and of common human actorhood (Strang and Meyer 1993). Further, as nation-states try to act, while taking on increasingly elaborate forms and responsibilities, they come to depend more and more upon the increasingly elaborate consulting machineries, a dynamic that in turn generates more and more responsibilities (Meyer 2000b).²⁹

In such a context, entire institutional complexes diffuse across the world system, leading to some striking departures from standard ideas about the adaptiveness of institutions. For instance: both the relative expansion of higher education within countries, and the relative development of scientific research organizations, show modest *negative* effects on countries' economic growth, at least in the short-run (Meyer, Schofer, and Ramirez, forthcoming). This pattern has largely been neglected by social scientists because it has not made much sense when seen from dominant standpoints (including in this case neoclassical economics). The institutionalist interpretation, pursued in current research, is that countries tend to construct broad-spectrum higher education and science institutions, not ones tightly linked to economic development (ibid.; also Schofer 1999). Accordingly, the presence of these institutions tends to be correlated with forms of world-cultural participation — for example, with the presence of human rights and environmental organizations — but negatively correlated with growth in the short-term, probably due to the investment costs involved (Shenhav and Kamens 1991).

The theoretical idea is that conformity processes are also found at the level of entire institutional complexes within world society. Higher education and science appear to a kind of “turn-key” social technologies, imported into societies but in forms linked more to broad ideas about a progressive society rather than to narrower social objectives such as economic growth.

Transformative Processes

Some of the systemic processes at work may be transformative ones; institutionalists have called particular attention so far to three. First, it seems that the processes above are transforming the very nature of states. As “enactors of multiple dramas whose texts are written elsewhere,” states increasingly are both expanded organizational forms, but also “sprawling, weakly integrated,” fragmented ones (Meyer 1999:136-139, 1994a:51-53). This line of argument provides one theoretically-principled account for now-common impressions of state decomposition or “disarticulation” (e.g., Smelser with Badie and Birnbaum 1994).

Second, in 1980 Meyer had argued that with the post-WWII buildup of the state, individuals had become more embedded in states, losing standing as autonomous actors (1980:132). However, with the intervening buildup of world society, there may be a trend-shift: Meyer and David Frank say that “the society to which the individual human belongs has also importantly globalized...” (Frank and Meyer 2000). Earlier Yasemin Soysal had isolated the core issue: an emergent and partial move beyond the nation-state model, via a “reconfiguration of citizenship” from a model based upon nationhood to a more transnational one based upon personhood and human (rather than citizen) rights (Soysal 1994:137 & Ch. 8). An emergent “post-national membership” – particularly apparent in Europe and surrounding issues of labor migration – “transgresses” the national order (ibid.:159). This disruption is apparent in the rise of multicultural politics, in the loosening of citizenship restrictions and obligations (e.g., voting, military), and in expansion of multiple citizenship arrangements.

Third — an even longer-term transformation — as basic cultural models change, the evolution has produced new logics for the actors of the system, including states, social movements, foundations, and consultants. For example, David Frank argues that a new cultural account of the humanity-nature relationship, picturing humans as embedded in the natural world via a long evolutionary chain, has generated the two dominant types of environmental movements: one that defines nature as part of society to be managed, and one that defines nature as sacred and requiring protection (Frank 1997; Frank et al. 1999). Deborah Barrett argues that the current “neo-Malthusian” orientation in population policy is rooted in the evolution of theories representing population growth as a constraint upon economic growth (and in the displacement of earlier theories associating population growth with state power) [Barrett 1995; Barrett and Frank 1999].

Multiple Modernities and Their Logics: Seeing the Modern Polities as Organizing around Distinct Variants of a Common Cultural Model

In another distinct line of argument, Meyer and others have depicted the different modern polities as distinct variants of a common Western cultural model. In this effort, initial direction was provided by Guy Swanson's conspectus of different types of polities within early modern Europe (1967, 1971). In this analysis, Swanson distinguished polities depending upon their primary locations of collective authority and agency: in a state apparatus; in remnants of a feudal community; and in individuals pictured as having direct ties to god (Thomas and Meyer 1984:471). Attempting to generalize such ideas, Meyer sketched a typology of modern polity types, distinguishing between statist, corporatist, and individualist orders (loosely capturing France, Germany, and the U.S. in their broad historical trajectories) (Meyer 1983). This idea subsequently has received some elaboration and modification, and some empirical exploration (Jepperson and Meyer 1991, Jepperson 2000).³⁰

It has been natural to argue that the different polity forms are responsible for a number of additional cross-national differences. For example, the arguments about the effects of varying polity-organization upon formal organizations, discussed above, have this character (i.e., Meyer 1983 and Jepperson and Meyer 1991). There have been other deployments of this sort. For instance, in a central book-length development using similar ideas, Yasemin Soysal showed that different types of European polities established different regimes for incorporating labor migrants into society (Soysal 1994). Similar arguments have been adduced for variations in constructions of family violence and child protection (e.g., that child or spouse abuse are less likely to emerge as public issues in more corporate polities [Meyer et al. 1988]), for cross-national variation in legal strategies (e.g., that statism and governmental centralization both appear to affect individual recourse to legal activity [Boyle 1998]), and for cross-national variation in voluntary associations (e.g., that different institutional orders construct different types of membership organizations and are more or less encouraging of individual participation in them [Schofer and Fourcade-Gourichas 2000]). Needless to say, these are just illustrative examples.³¹

In a powerful illustration and deepening of this line of argument, Frank Dobbin documented long-lasting historical effects of variations in basic political models (Dobbin 1994b, 1995). In his book on railroad development and industrial policy formation in the U.S. and Europe (esp. France), Dobbin shows that very different interpretations were given to railroad development in (statist) France and the (liberal) U.S., despite surprisingly similar actual public sector involvements. Similar state activities were "concealed" as state actions in the

U.S. while “revealed” and accentuated in France. The different interpretations were generated from the different pre-existing political cosmologies of France and the U.S., and then the interpretations themselves were powerfully consequential (Dobbin shows) for the subsequent divergent development of industrial policies.

Endnote.

The underlying institutionalist idea is that states too are interpenetrated with their institutional environments. They appear to be “at least as fraudulent as functional creatures as organizations, schools, and persons”³² — a perspective at odds with the arch realism of much “theory of the state” in sociology and political science.

INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY WITHIN INDIVIDUALISM³³

Background Argument: the Political Reconstruction of Society around Individualism

Much of the development of national polities has been “channeled into an intensification of individualism, rather than taking other forms, so that it is easy to view the secularization and elaboration of individualism as a main theme in Western history” (Meyer 1986b:200). Institutionalism emphasizes that this individualism is an evolving public theory: a public political theory (citizenship), a public economic theory (markets), a public religious and cultural theory (the soul, the private self) [Meyer 1986b:200]. As such, doctrines of individualism are central to the basic Western cultural models of society.

The research on the “world educational revolution” mentioned above was pursued in part in its connection with the production of modern individuals (including, citizen-members of nation-states) [Meyer, Ramirez, and Boli-Bennett 1977; Meyer, Ramirez, and Soysal 1992]. John Boli’s book on the emergence of mass schooling in Sweden is precisely about the institutionalization of schooling as the dominant approach to childrearing (and individual formation) [Boli 1989], as were Francisco Ramirez’s and Boli’s related surveys of comparative-historical material about the relations of states and schools [Ramirez and Boli 1987a] and of available comparative data on the development of schooling systems [Ramirez and Boli 1987b]). Boli showed in detail that the “social imperative” of mass schooling developed before the urban and industrial take-off of the 1860s and ‘70s. Instead it was rooted in an earlier-developing Europe-wide social movement, in which European states, both competing with and imitating one another, attempted to construct nations of citizen-individuals (Boli 1989).³⁴

Individualism as a Collective-level Construction and Individual-level Enactment

Standard ideas about the development of individualism have pictured it as an outcome of social-psychological, especially experiential, processes. For example, scholars have often depicted individualism as an outcome of people's reactions to their experience of markets or cities or industrial work. The causal imagery, often implicit, is one of people experiencing a market system individually, reacting to it largely individually (or maybe with others in households or local communities), and then through their aggregate reactions eventually producing a large-scale cultural commonality – individualism.

This picture has been almost axiomatic for many scholars. For example, in their survey-based study of the development of “individual modernity” in developing countries, Alex Inkeles and David Smith argued that “exposure to modern institutions produces modern persons,” focusing in particular upon exposure to modern factories (Inkeles and Smith 1974:307). Presumably if enough people are exposed long enough, an individualist (“modernized”) context is produced: that is, via an individual-level experiential process, and via aggregation of the common individual effects. Many other studies shared this imagery. However, the evidence produced by these same studies did not well support such interpretations. For instance, in the Inkeles and Smith data the best predictors of an individual's relative “modernity”³⁵ were his education level, then nationality, then mass media exposure — all reflecting highly ideological forces. To Inkeles and Smith's apparent surprise, other variables, including those better capturing people's social experience – for example, years of factory work, occupation, urban vs. rural origins, family background – were far less salient.

In response to such empirical patterns, Meyer offered a reinterpretation of individualism, featuring (once again) collective-level processes (Meyer 1986a, 1986b, 1990). In this alternative imagery, individualism is “not centrally the product of human persons organizing their experience for themselves,” but rather in the first instance a doctrine worked out by “various bodies of professional officials – religious ideologues, their secular counterparts (for example, psychologists, teachers, lawyers, and administrators) – and by other institutions of the modern state” (Meyer 1986a:212, emphasis added). People are then aggressively tutored in such doctrine (in families, schools, the polity) and come to enact it as part of their basic identity. In this account, a different set of causal processes is featured: collective-level scripting together with individual enactment. From this account it would follow that the relative “modernity” of people (for instance) would vary depending more upon a person's relative immersion in the ideologies of individualism – in the education system, for

instance – than upon their actual social experience. And this is what empirical research tends to show (Meyer 1990; Jepperson 1992).

In such arguments, Meyer and other institutionalists were not so much reacting to specific research programs but more to a general analytical imagery: the almost automatic rendering of societal outcomes in individual-level terms. For instance, James Coleman seemed to insist that the effect of Protestantism upon European society must be theorized as an aggregation of the changed behaviors of individuals re-socialized by Protestant churches and sects (Coleman 1986).³⁶ Sociological institutionalists depart from both the methodological individualism and from the specific substantive sociological claim. Instead, they would argue that Protestantism in the first instance modified collectively dominant models of society.³⁷ In so doing it also reworked the identity and status of the individual in these models, giving the individual dramatically enhanced metaphysical and public centrality. Over time individuals began to enact this new expanded identity, tutored by church, legal, and pedagogic scripts. This enactment can proceed concurrently with more experiential effects such as Max Weber's postulated "salvation anxiety," but may in fact may be the more fundamental process involved in large-scale transformation. This argument is representative of the institutionalist challenge to individual-level processes and actor-centric explanation.

Construction of the Self Relative to an Institutionalized "Life Course"

In the same papers, Meyer argued that basic features of the self are as much affected by highly institutionalized scripts for assembling an individual identity than by any untutored, unscripted, "experiences" (Meyer 1986b:199). People "work out selves with a great deal of institutional support" (ibid.). In particular, a distinctive personal identity is worked out relative to a highly standardized and institutionalized "life course": "carefully sequenced age-grade systems of childrearing, education, work, and retirement" (ibid.:200). Much of a life is highly institutionally assembled and organized: for example, most middle-class people in the U.S. (for example) "know" that they will go to school, have a family and career and leisure, retire, and so on (ibid.:207).

Because of this extensive structuring, Meyer hypothesizes, measures that tap people's subjective experience of the institutionalized life course — for instance, their consciousness of their education and occupation — will understandably show high prominence and high continuity over time. Other features of consciousness or personality closely linked to major life course statuses should also appear central and stable: for instance, cognitive competencies, values and tastes, knowledge, and perceived efficaciousness —

qualities all linked to formal education. As a corollary, however, those aspects of subjectivity *less* directly tied to core life course statuses might be expected to show less stability over time: for instance, measurements of individual's needs for achievement or power or intimacy, or measures of self-esteem or self-control. Stability in these features of the subjective self may be suppressed, precisely because modern society "strips definite and fixed role-related content from the self, leaving it free to find motives, needs, expectations, and perceptions appropriate to the situation" (ibid. p. 209).

In such a context, Meyer adds, researchers can easily form impressions of a general "instability" of the self, but this is misleading. This impression is partly due to scholarly definition: that is, their conceptualization of the self as precisely those features of personal identity *not* institutionally and structurally stabilized (Meyer 1986b:208). "The whole mass of material connected to the rules of the life course tends to be excluded" from research definitions of the self, and, in fact, people generally "may use the term 'self' to capture only the transitory aspects of their identity" (ibid.). The point: isolating cultural parameters of the self can help to account for otherwise anomalous features.

The different individualisms and hence different individual identities of the modern polities.

The previous arguments were general arguments about individualism, and about individual identity within individualism. But this institutionalism also encourages one to look for variation: specifically variation in the kinds of individualism constructed in the different Western polities.

In initial formulations Meyer had distanced himself from "national character" (and related) ideas about cross-national variations in individual identity. For instance, reflecting upon the findings of *The Civic Culture*, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's famous comparative study (1963), Meyer addressed the finding that people in Germany (in the late 1950s) tended to report a lower sense of political efficacy than individuals elsewhere. Meyer argued that this outcome as likely reflects features of the German political system than any uniquely German "characterological" deficiencies in ego-strength or self-esteem — that is, it is more likely that the German respondents were simply reporting the rather inefficacious status accorded to them, in the rather elitist and statist German democracy of the time (Meyer 1970b). The underlying idea, articulated later, is that modern nation-states are all "variously committed to individualism," but institutionalize different forms of it — forms that people learn to enact in their behavior and report in their talk (Frank, Meyer, and Miyahara 1995:362; Jepperson 1992). The U.S. represents a historically extreme form of

individualism, given that it was originally constituted in an individualist and associational way (and fundamentally Protestant way) (Meyer 1983b, 1986a:214-15). In connection with this historical atypicality, in comparative studies Americans tend to get *high* scores in measures of self-direction and felt efficacy. In Meyer's argument, Americans respond this way more "because they think they are Americans, rather than because of any extraordinary individuation in their experience" – that is, because they are enacting the basic model of the American polity, a model that stresses individual agency and responsibility (Meyer 1990:54). The various European individualisms in contrast have all tended to embed the individual in more communal social structure of one sort or another (family, locality, other communities, the state). Accordingly, Meyer argues, one would expect Europeans relative to Americans to report less sense of autonomy and less felt social efficacy — which they in fact do in survey responses and interviews (Meyer 1986b:214, Jepperson 1992).

These institutionalist ideas have as yet only partly been pursued in research. Jepperson (1992) pursued and elaborated them some in a dissertation synthesizing available cross-national survey material, showing their utility in comprehending cross-national variation in individual attitudes and identities. Relatedly, David Frank, Meyer, and David Miyahara studied national variation in the size of the psychology profession world-wide, finding that the size of the profession (incorporating various controls) tended to covary roughly with the individualism of the polity (for example, Protestant countries were high) (Frank et al. 1995). This result accords with the idea that the greater the individualism of the polity, the greater the prominence of professionalized psychology – due to the greater public salience of issues of individual psychological identity in the more individualistic cultural settings.

General Changes in Individual Identity as Individualism Has Evolved.

Meyer and others deployed the same basic ideas historically, to grasp some general West-wide changes in individual identity over time. "Individualism, like other central elements of Western doctrine, is continually being 'reconstructed'" (Meyer 1986a:212). Here less work has been done, but three ideas seem especially central.

First, the scope of individualism has continued to expand, both within and across societies — just as early Christian conceptualizations greatly expanded the number of morally relevant "souls" in the world. To reference just one line of research, Francisco Ramirez and colleagues have been innovative and persistent in tracking empirically the worldwide cultural reconstruction of women into citizen-individuals, focusing especially upon the movement of women into higher

education — a movement long-in-coming but then rapid and nearly worldwide once initiated, even in countries (like some Islamic ones) that otherwise maintain high levels of gender segregation (Ramirez and Weiss 1979; Ramirez and Cha 1990; Bradley and Ramirez 1996).³⁸ Even more broadly, and obviously, ideas of basic “human rights” extend individuality (and a kind of world citizenship) to all humans (Boli and Thomas 1999b).³⁹

A second general change: as more previously private issues and domains have become public over time, producing an expanded public domain across the modern nation-states, the private sphere has been correspondingly reconstructed. For instance, as sexuality has moved more into the public culture (and hence out of a more purely private realm), the private self is reconstituted. Over time, this private self is less sexed: more a “sexless figure for whom sexuality is a technique of proper linkage to the world, not an intrinsic element” (Meyer 1986a:224). In related research, David Frank and Elizabeth McEneaney studied changes in the legal regulation of sexuality. As individuals have replaced families as the basis of societies, sexuality has moved out of family control into a public sphere in which sexuality becomes a matter of public rights, and hence eventually less subject to legal control (Frank and McEneaney 1999).

Third, the long-term and ongoing deconstruction of previous corporate and collective identities (hypernationalisms, caste-like identities, family-based identities, collective religious identities), together with the concurrent buildup of equal personhood as a central public identity, are root causes of the “contemporary identity explosion” (Frank and Meyer 2000). The former process creates new available sources of personal identity (for instance, the taming of ethnicity in the U.S. creates newly available “symbolic ethnicity” for individuals). The second element creates a newly dominant node of identity to which all kinds of qualities and tastes can be attached. These ideas are being pursued in current institutionalist writing and research.

Endnote

This institutionalism casts individuals in the same light as modern society’s other “actors”: their actorhood is highly constructed and scripted. In this line of argument, basic features of individual identity have been reinterpreted as a consequence of collective-level cultural processes: in this case, the collective project of individualism.

SOCIOLOGICAL NEOINSTITUTIONALISM AS A THEORETICAL RESEARCH PROGRAM

Relations with Other Research Programs

Institutionalism has evolved as an integrated TRP, but with constant referencing of and “product differentiation” relative to other research programs. This attention has been somewhat unrequited, with institutionalism paying a bit more attention than it receives. This pattern is readily understandable, since institutionalism emerged in constant contrast to more dominant, and hence more secure and insular, actor-centric imageries. The specifics have varied by research areas, as follows.

Education

The applications in the sociology of education mentioned above were developed in close connection to an established literature on schooling effects, and they were intended to complement (and contextualize) the field’s concentration upon the socialization of individuals and their “allocation” to positions in society. The integration of the intellectual results of institutionalism with those of other research programs has probably been richest and most basic in this area, and the TRP has been theoretically central within it (Meyer 1986c; Meyer and Ramirez 1981; Meyer and Ramirez 2000). It also has been a main carrier of the comparative and world-level research that has occurred in the field (Meyer and Ramirez, *ibid.*), and it has been widely recognized for doing so.⁴⁰

*Organizations*⁴¹

In organizational analysis, institutionalist applications evolved in a context dominated by realist, functionalist and rationalist pictures: organizations as hardwired decision-making structures, functionally adapted to technical environments or powerful interests. In this area, the institutionalist intervention evolved concurrently with that of population ecology (with its related focus on organizational populations in environments). A productive exchange between these two programs has continued. For instance, ecologists have incorporated the idea that organizational populations might be constructed by institutional forces (Hannan and Freeman 1989), and they have tried to incorporate variation in legitimacy as one of the selection forces operating in environments (Carroll and Hannan 1989, an approach partly resisted by institutionalists in a direct interchange [Zucker 1989]). In contrast, less progress has been made in cleanly separating institutionalist arguments from more conventional “resource-dependence” ones, since institutionalism too invokes resource connections. Productive efforts, however, continue.⁴² Little effort has been made to clarify the respective contributions and possible complementarities of institutionalist and

rationalist (esp. “rational choice”) arguments — the terms for doing so have not been well clarified, and the effort is hampered by mutual disinterest.⁴³ In programmatic statements, however, institutionalists have remained largely ecumenical, imagining that different imageries will make different contributions, and insisting mainly on the utility of maintaining a fully macroscopic and phenomenological perspective as well as others in the field (Scott 1995, *passim*; Meyer and Scott 1992:2-5).⁴⁴

Given the arch realism of much organizational analysis, it has been common to typify institutionalism as an exaggerated culturalism: Charles Perrow grouched that Meyer and Scott and others were “overboard with myth and symbols” — a characterization that some institutionalists played into (Perrow 1985).⁴⁵ The specifically *anthropological* meaning of “formal structure as myth and ceremony” was elided, as were Meyer and Scott’s (and collaborators’) broader structuralist and comparative efforts. Given this common characterization, it is surprising that sociological neoinstitutionalism has more recently been described by a recent review (rather hyperbolically) as “the leading perspective among organizational scholars in the U.S.” (Mizruchi and Fein 1999:678), as well as being influential in Europe (Krücken and Hasse 1999). However, institutionalism has been established in this field in a truncated way.⁴⁶ There have been tendencies to focus narrowly upon the “mimetic isomorphism” isolated by DiMaggio and Powell (Mizruchi and Lein 1999), to treat institutionalism as having to do with narrowly symbolic issues or organizational culture, and to turn institutionalism into a modified actor/interest theory (featuring the interests of state or professional elites in producing organizational forms) — inducing Meyer, Scott, and Dobbin among others to demur.⁴⁷

Nation-states

In this application area, there has been less integration, cross-fertilization, and attempted adjudication than within educational or organizational analysis. The institutionalist applications were developed in conjunction once again with an ecological perspective (represented by Michael Hannan). Meyer and Hannan initially reported that they could not easily find ways to adjudicate between institutional and ecological perspectives (Meyer and Hannan 1979:10-16); over time, Hannan moved away from world system studies, in part because the units in question (states) did not really appear to be under that much competitive selection pressure (at least of the stringent sort focused upon by population ecology). As institutionalist work evolved independently, a relationship to Wallerstein’s world system program became more evident, a connection partly complementary and partly competitive in character. From the institutionalist standpoint, the emphasis on a world polity and culture was meant to provide contextualization for ideas of a world economy and stratification system. Perhaps for this reason, there has

been more institutionalist reference to the Wallerstein-centered program than the reverse.⁴⁸

Institutionalists were also partly trying to qualify other realist perspectives on states, those tending to see states as hard organizational structures largely in resource competition. (The opposition is presented most clearly in Thomas and Meyer 1984.) Initially realist-minded scholars did not much join the discussion, tending to ignore or downplay institutionalist efforts.⁴⁹ More recently, however, Charles Tilly has called attention to the importance of the “international modeling of state structures,” drawing upon Meyer (1999) [Tilly 1999].⁵⁰ Also recently, the TRP has begun to show up in political science and international relations, traditionally redoubts of social science realism — if in a somewhat tamed form least disruptive of political science’s theoretical categories.⁵¹ However, the TRP is generating some substantive applications as well as merely commentary: in international relations, for example, Martha Finnemore has studied how international organizations tutor states (such as how UNESCO has scripted much science policy) (Finnemore 1996b); Peter Katzenstein and collaborators, drawing upon this institutionalism as well as other “constructivist” perspectives, have studied the consolidation of state identities and norms (Katzenstein 1996); and in a project coordinated by Alec Stone Sweet, Wayne Sandholtz, and Neil Fligstein, scholars draw in a routine way upon sociological neoinstitutionalism as one of their theoretical sources in studying the “institutionalization of Europe” (Stone Sweet, Sandholtz, and Fligstein, forthcoming).

Individualism

Research in this application area is highly scattered, and for that straightforward reason clear relations between research programs have not emerged. Meyer drew directly upon the extensive psychology-based literature on the life-course in developing his ideas about the self, and his formulations have in return been incorporated into the life-course literature. In contrast, a coherent interprogram discussion of individualism and the self has not yet formed: cultural and social historians, comparative social psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists have been proceeding in a segmental way.

Contributions of the Program

The contributions of sociological neoinstitutionalism have been of three main sorts. First and foremost, like any truly basic analytical imagery, this institutionalism makes *new observations* possible — just as actor-centric imagery (its “rational choice” form) illuminated “collective action” (Olson 1965) and principal/agent relationships (Kiser 1999). Institutionalism too directs attention to different features of the social world, fundamental features that were otherwise

unnoticed or disregarded. For instance, because of their focus upon possible effects of a broader world frame, institutionalists brought out the homogeneity in structure among nation-states. This homogeneity is striking, and remarkable given the great differences in country resources and cultures, but before institutionalism it had not been much problematized. In organizational analysis, institutionalists brought out the extraordinary world-spanning rationalization and standardization of organizational forms, as well as the transformation of organizational forms to accommodate the “expanded individuals” of contemporary society. Regarding individualism, institutionalists brought out (for example) the variation in professional psychology across countries, in its connection to differently constructed individualisms. In each of the application areas discussed above, the truly fundamental contribution of institutionalism has been to call attention to features of the social world that were largely *unobserved* before, let alone theorized.

Second, institutionalism also has offered *new explanations* — either about its new observations, or about established observations. For instance, sociology had long observed the ubiquitous decoupling of formal structures from informal arrangements and practical activity. The institutionalist literature gave this decoupling centrality and offered a more general explanation of it, linking it to conformity with institutionalized environments. Sociology had also obviously long observed the increasing individualism of modern society. Institutionalism offered new explanations, including the very basic argument that individualism was unlikely just an outcome of people’s aggregated social experiences, but rather a collective doctrinal construction and individual enactment. Such ideas had certainly been voiced before — a root source is Emile Durkheim’s discussion of the modern “cult of the individual” (Collins 1992: Ch. 2) — but the institutionalist interventions have isolated the core analytical issues much more clearly.

Third, the concentration upon institutionalized cultural models enables this institutionalism to produce *reflexive contributions*, by endogenizing features of social science in its explanations. For instance, institutionalism offers not only a distinctive set of observations and explanations about modern educational systems. It also offers a theory of the sociology of education itself: namely, how this field has largely accepted the cultural myths of education, its research agenda then historically rather narrowly organized around the ways in which educational realities fail to live up to these myths. Or how the literature on social stratification has similarly been organized around broader cultural myths of individualism and egalitarianism (focusing resolutely on specific forms of individual inequality and missing more organizational forms of it as well as overly backgrounding the extraordinary egalitarian dynamic of the contemporary period)

[Meyer 1994b]. Or how the literature on “international relations” has sustained its arch realism about states only by constantly redefining its turf so as to maintain a narrow focus on continuing forms of interstate conflict and disorder in the system, editing out a broader world polity and culture (Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein 1996).

In principle, the contributions of sociological neoinstitutionalism should be complementary with insights generated by other basic analytical imageries. However, the whole issue of complementarity is rarely taken up, given sociology’s sect-like segmentation and propensity to reify theories.

The Main Source of the Program’s Contributions

Actor-centric imagery, as in James Coleman’s most basic explication (Coleman 1986), “backgrounds” context and the historical construction of actors in a context, and foregrounds (1) largely taken-for-granted actors in their interest-driven choices and strategic interactions, and (2) the aggregations of these choices, or the outcomes of their strategic interaction games. The various utilitarian, exchange, and (many) network sociologies all build upon this basic imagery, if in differing ways.

In contrast, if one foregrounds cultural institutionalization, the picture of modern actors — organizations, states, individuals — as tightly integrated, highly bounded, autonomously-acting entities, hardwired outside of society, is problematized. In fact, as empirically observed, these entities appear to be open, interpenetrated with institutional environments, and hence loosely coupled and varying in particular construction. Because of these qualities, actors from this institutionalism’s standpoint are seen as rather derivative, for analytical purposes. For instance, if actors are highly open, rather than tightly bounded, they are then subject to many context effects: ranging from the initial contextual construction of modal actor identities, to the collective scripting of activity for identities, to actors’ ongoing dependence upon consultation with “others” for managing identities and making (already highly scripted) choices. These context effects accordingly occupy institutionalist attention.

The task of causal analysis for this institutionalism is then different. It becomes the study of the construction and institutionalization of the cultural model that both defines identities and scripts the main lines of activity for identities. Thus, the modeling and enactment processes that transmit and reproduce these scripts are focalized, and the choice processes that occur within highly institutionalized frames and identities become of secondary interest. For example, the institutionalist interest is more in why and where markets are

created, rather than market behavior, and why (and where) elections exist, rather than why people vote the way they do.⁵² Similarly, the institutionalist interest is more in the non-choice (the taken-for-granted routine) of going to college for most middle class American high school students, and less in the choice of which college to attend. There is fundamental interest in how contemporary individuals believe (and often pretend) they are making unscripted and autonomous choices – and in how researchers go along with the pretense – when more usually people are enacting models and scripts of broad collective construction and reach.

One upshot of institutionalist research is that modern actors only exist with a lot of institutional scaffolding and support; but then with this support they are not really actors in the senses often imagined. The “middle class students” just mentioned (or their parents) can talk with much more elaboration and clarity than their forebears (or than, say, peasants). But much of their talk (as well as their menus of choice) are highly scripted and institutionally organized. They are thus more actor-like in some respects, but arguably less actors (than their forebears, or peasants) in other respects. In any case they are not plausibly the exaggerated actors marching around the metatheory of actor-centric social science. The bite of this institutionalism is its exposure of the hypocrisies of modern actorhood — and its related insistence that one needs to do anthropology about modern “actors” as much as about peasants (Meyer and Jepperson 2000).

While de-focalizing actors in order to problematize them, *people* and *activity* are nevertheless thoroughly invoked in institutionalist arguments. But the people who are invoked are not usually actors, and the activity invoked is not usually action — at least in the sense of generic humans engaging in highly informed, reflective, deliberative, and autonomous choice-making in pursuit of relatively private interests.⁵³ Instead the people invoked in this institutionalism are usually ones operating as *agents* of the collectivity (like professionals or state elites or advocates), formulating or carrying broad collective projects. Or, they are “*others*,” in G.H. Mead’s sense — that is, social responders and consultants, asserting the basic expectations and standard practices of society (Meyer 1994a, 1996). Collective agency and othering provide the primary microfoundations for this institutionalism.

Evolution and “Growth” of the Program

Pattern of growth

Seen in ecological terms, the program gives the impression of pursuing a highly stable specialist strategy — in this respect like other basic imageries such as rational choice or population ecology (although unlike rational choice it has no pretense of being a self-sufficient or all-purpose imagery). In Joseph Berger’s

and Morris Zelditch's terms (Berger and Zelditch 1998), the pattern of growth has been the "proliferation" of substantive applications over the domains defined by the main socially constructed "actors" of modern society — organizations, states, individuals. In each domain, as we've seen, the same basic logic is applied: the formation of actor-structures within institutional environments. As we've also seen, the specific substantive applications were also motivated by empirical anomalies (or theory-empirics gaps) apparent in the research literature.

Sources of growth

The proliferation of the program has been propelled primarily by what Berger and Zelditch call a "substantive working strategy" and a "methodological working strategy" (ibid.) The substantive strategy is the theoretical imagery discussed throughout. The methodological strategy has been to study historical and comparative variations among contexts — due to the highly contextual nature of the core theoretical ideas. Institutionalists have especially sought to study the basic cultural models of social systems, and their effects; this concentration follows from the basic argument that the actors and "others" in modern social environments are constantly elaborating and taking up models for organizing and acting. Such studies have been fostered by a set of research designs in what someone half-seriously labeled "quantitative macro phenomenology"; these have been worked out by Meyer and colleagues (like Mike Hannan, Dick Scott, and Nancy Tuma), and deployed in many doctoral dissertations especially. These designs have often involved finding comparative or historical quantitative data — or materials that can be coded as counts — and using standard techniques of statistical inference, although often employed in exploratory and interpretive ways that cannot be described here.⁵⁴

Over time research designs have become more diverse. Quantitative analyses have diversified beyond regression-based strategies, following the field. And the program has become less exclusively based in quantitative designs, especially with greater comparative historical work (for example, by Boli, Dobbin, Soysal, and others). Evidence and measurement strategies have continued to broaden, to include coding of (for example) yearbooks of international organizations (for study of the buildup of world culture [Boli and Thomas 1997]), college curricula (for study of changes in the knowledge system [David Frank, in preparation]), history and civics texts (for study of changing collective identities [Frank et al. 2000; Soysal 1998]), and conferences and discourse of international nongovernmental organizations (about women, environment, science) since the nineteenth century (for study of changing cultural models) (Boli and Thomas 1999).

In connection with these developments, the inferential strategies for showing institutional effects have become more direct. In initial research institutionalists sought mainly to demonstrate the existence of unexpected isomorphisms and decouplings, and then secondarily to infer, indirectly, the existence of institutionalization as a cause of them. This was an “inputed effects” strategy (Schneiberg and Clemens, forthcoming): the *absence* of standard (for example, organizational) correlations was taken as indirect evidence of the *presence* of institutional forces. In analysis of educational organizations, this inferential strategy worked well, since readers were informally quite familiar with the institutional classifications involved (grade-levels, standard curricula, etc.). In analysis of nation-states, the absence of major economic effects (say, on some feature of political structure) plus the presence of isomorphism, plus some evidence on world society processes, were used to infer institutionalization.

As research has expanded, there have been more direct demonstrations of institutional effects. For example, the research on the effects of “world society” contain a number of such more direct studies of the effects of change at the institutional level: David Frank et al. 1999 on changes in constructions of the environment, and their effects; Deborah Barrett on changes in ideology about population growth and control, and their effects (Barrett 1995, Barrett and Frank 1999); Nitza Berkovitch (1999a, 199b) on changes in doctrines about the identity and status of women, and their effects. (Boli 1999 summarizes some of this research.)

It seems fair to say that the research fertility of the program does not appear to be based in any of the following possible sources of theoretical innovation and growth. There are no special methodological tools or claims. There is no special theoretical formalization. There is no special epistemology or logic of explanation — beyond an insistence on multi-level analysis and hence an unwillingness to go along with the very special epistemology of methodological individualism. There is no exotic topical concentration: the program has generated applications in the historically core domains of sociology, and has published in standard general outlets. The fertility and distinctiveness of the program is based almost exclusively in its different theoretical imagery, and in the aggressive empirical deployment of this imagery in different domains using a set of similar research designs. Almost all energy has been put into identifying and exploring interesting substantive issues, new sources of data, and different possible explanations, with metatheoretic issues (for good or for ill) largely put aside.⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

In its research fertility, theoretic integration, and continued expansion, sociological neoinstitutionalism seems a very substantial success. However, institutionalism has been less successful in receiving full acknowledgement of these achievements, at least as yet. Two factors appear to account for this interesting disjunction. First, one should not underestimate a standard factor: the highly segmental ecology of the field sustains intellectual diversity but also produces little encouragement for actual interchange or recognition (or for that matter, for broad reading — there is often little incentive to know about others' work, even though the myth of mutual awareness and interest is maintained).

Second, the intellectual culture of American sociology is still predominantly individualist and realist in construction, and institutionalism maximally deviates by being both structuralist and phenomenological. Due to this deviance, it predictably has received feigned and real incomprehension — for instance, easy labeling as a dispensable concern for myth and symbols, or for other “superstructural” fluff. (Some neoinstitutionalist writings have played into these characterizations.) The fundamental institutionalist concern with the basic matrices of modern society is thereby elided. In this way, this institutionalism as yet is not firmly conventionalized as a line of truly basic social theory.⁵⁶

There is a deeper “sociology of knowledge” at work here, one that we can discern and analyze using the resources of this TRP.⁵⁷ The dominant cultural model in the world system is an actor/interest one: the world as made up of bounded, interest-bearing, intendedly-rational, organizational and individual actors (see Meyer and Jepperson 2000 for discussion). In this context, social science theory that reifies and works off this ontology tends to be established as a kind of baseline social science. Such theory becomes not just one theoretical imagery, but instead is constantly elevated into an imagined self-sufficient all-purpose social theory, or even a required methodology. This elevation is reflected in the common idea that actor/interest explanations should be the first response for any social science issue, and that efforts should not cease until explanations are expressed in actor/interest terms. In this picture, any institutionalism or culturalism tends to be relegated to the job of mopping up unexplained residua or storytelling about anomalies. Sometimes these ideas are presented explicitly, as if they were philosophic dicta (Abell 1995, to a degree Coleman 1986).

When some social phenomenon is kicked up by realworld change, or observed by another imagery, there are then ever-ready attempts to translate it into the master actor/interest narrative. For example, there are attempts to render

the contemporary world-wide wave of women's rights in individualist and rationalist terms — for example, as a consequence of declining birth rates or of women having extra time on their hands. Often what is offered is more a promissory note that the phenomenon *could* folded into the master account — and this assurance alone is often sufficient. Such post hoc “as if” realist/rationalist arguments proliferate, in which rational choice, resource dependence or network ideas are stretched extraordinarily to cover, and hence supplant, institutionalist or culturalist observations and arguments.

In fact as any change in basic institutionalization occurs, some will just wish to “bracket” the change, quickly normalizing and taking-for-granted the new actors or new interests that may be generated. After all, any new institutionalization becomes a new base for new intendedly-rational strategy.⁵⁸ For instance, once families have been wholly reconstructed to be about individuals, once patriarchic arrangements have been compromised and supplanted by neopatriarchic ones, once women have been redefined as citizen-individuals, a transformation propelled by a deep cultural logic of the social system — then over time one can begin to talk about women as simply routine actors pursuing routine interests. All the changes in the world that had to occur to make a new worldwide wave of women's rights feasible and likely can be extruded from a necessary social scientific account — relabeled as merely history, not theory. And with this always-renewable bracketing, the underlying changes in the institutional structure of the system eventually disappear from view (Meyer in Krücken 2000:62) — and out of imagined necessary theory.

In response to these processes, some institutionalists and culturalists tend to move to yet new turfs to find phenomena to claim their own (or to disrupt actor/interest accounts) — usually turfs currently coded as epiphenomenal or cultural in the broader culture itself. So some analysts move to attend to the current expansion of gay and lesbian rights (Meyer in Kruecken 2000:62) (still surprising to many, less taken-for-granted), or to the general explosion of cultural “identities,” or to the broadening of conceptions of society to include more of nature (reflected in “animal rights”), or to the broadening of states' apparent “interests” to include (say) clean air or daycare facilities — that is, to phenomena that have not yet been fully institutionalized and conventionalized. Of course with any institutionalization these new phenomena too could be incorporated as a natural, interest-based, social outcome: that is, there can be ongoing re-bracketing of all the contextual reconstitution involved, and new potted actor/interest histories imagined.

The consequence is an enduring push to marginalize culturalisms and institutionalisms theoretically, combined with a dependence upon them for their observations of society (observations denied to intellectual strategies that intentionally defocalize society). The predictable further consequences, readily observable at present, include: (1) status restoration attempts whereby some of the more culturally-inclined scholars try to link to the more legitimated actor/interest models, producing many hybridized actor/interest-institutionalisms. Also, in the opposite direction, (2) some of the more purely culturally inclined go off into sect-like closure movements. For example, some “cultural studies” groups detach themselves from the dominant analytical culture, often aggressively, setting themselves up as separate small disciplines with separate claimed epistemologies and methods.

The sociological neoinstitutionalism of this paper has sustained enough integration and momentum that it has not gone in either of these directions, but instead has been able to establish itself as a working strategy in a number of subfields, as we’ve seen. But it too experiences to some degree the analytical marginalization process just described, which explains its concurrent limited recognition as a line of basic theory. Thus, the duality of its status, as initially described.

However, in a final dialectic, the segmental ecology and intellectual culture of sociology have also facilitated institutionalism, internally — as one line of truly basic social theory. The worldwide social scientific reification of actorhood continues to give sociological institutionalism a lot of space — to defocalize actorhood — and produces far fewer near-competitors, and far less real criticism, than should be present. In this space, this institutionalism continues to “proliferate” as what Lakatos called a “progressive TRP,” both expanding and deepening its research applications.

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Endnotes

¹ There are few treatments of sociological neoinstitutionalism as an integrated TRP. Krücken and Haase (1999) is a monograph in German reviewing sociological neoinstitutionalism generally, starting with organizational analysis. The most important general theoretical statement is Meyer, Boli, and Thomas (1987). A consideration of conceptual issues is offered in Jepperson 1991. Other reviews concentrate upon parts of the program. DiMaggio and Powell (1991) concentrate upon organizational analysis. A book-length survey of the whole range of neoinstitutionalist ideas and research in organizational analysis is provided by Scott (1995).

² The scope of this paper is intentionally restricted in the following ways: (1) The paper limits itself to the sociological neoinstitutionalism associated especially with John Meyer, and does not attempt to provide an overview of the various institutionalisms present in sociological theory. Scott (1995) and DiMaggio and Powell (1991) provide more general overviews, as does Hall and Taylor (1996) for political science. It is probably safe to say that the sociological neoinstitutionalism surveyed in this paper has been the version most developed as a “theoretical research program” in the specific sense analyzed by Berger and Zelditch (1998). (2) Within this restricted focus, there is particular attention to Meyer’s work, for straightforward reasons: many of the core ideas and innovations in the program come from his individual work or from his collaboration with colleagues (such as Michael Hannan and W.R. Scott) and with students and ex-students. (3) Due to this volume’s focus, and to space constraints, this review concentrates upon expounding the development of ideas within the research program. While it refers constantly to the program’s empirical studies, it is not able to convey them with proper vividness and detail. Nor is it able to offer a critical evaluation of the program.

³ For instance, an unpublished memo on “institutionalization” bears that date (Meyer 1970b; ideas discussed with Morris Zelditch, Jr., among others), as does Meyer’s article offering an institutional reinterpretation of the nature of “socialization” in schools (Meyer 1970c, to be discussed).

⁴ In a concurrent development, Lynne Zucker’s “The Role of Institutionalization in Cultural Persistence” (1977) demonstrated experimentally that presenting a situation as an institutionalized formal organization has substantial effects upon individuals’ expectations and behavior. (Zucker had studied at Stanford and had worked with a number of the sociologists and social psychologists there.)

⁵ Meyer was taking off most immediately from the general interest in contextual and structural thinking prominent at Columbia University in the 1960s, as well as from phenomenological ideas then developing in the sociological environment (including ethnomethodology, Peter Berger’s [and Berger and Luckmann’s] work, Erving Goffman’s social psychology.) These ideas were emerging partly in response to Talcott Parsons’ and Robert Merton’s focus upon norms, internalization, and socialization — a focus increasingly seen as excessive and empirically problematic. Meyer was also influenced directly by Daniel Bell (viz., Bell’s general macrohistorical concerns), and by Paul Lazarsfeld (viz., Lazarsfeld’s concern for multi-level analysis). Meyer was a lecturer in a program led by Bell, and was a research assistant for Lazarsfeld.

⁶ In Germany, the educational system has been far more differentiated by types of schools, with the different tracks associated with different occupations and social status. Hence in Germany the identity “graduate” has not been a singular one: people have received one of a number of different identities from their participation in a particular segment of the educational system.

⁷ “Even Weber’s idea that institutions require *legitimacy* can be reinterpreted to mean not that people must approve of them or like them, but that they must acknowledge that they are actually binding — that they do actually organize social responses to the actor” (Meyer 1970b).

⁸ Meyer, personal communication, July 2000.

⁹ Meyer and W. Richard Scott offer their own narrative of the emergence and development of this institutionalism in organizational analysis (Meyer and Scott 1992:1-17) – an account adhered to here. See Scott 1995 for an extended (book-length) and definitive treatment. See also Strang 1994 for a particularly effective characterization of the elaboration of research ideas in this area, as well as DiMaggio and Powell 1991 (esp. good on intellectual context), Zucker 1987 (for many substantive examples), and Dobbin 1994a (esp. good on phenomenological aspects of the program).

¹⁰ By Meyer, Elizabeth Cohen, Terrence Deal, and Brian Rowan, among others.

¹¹ The idea, originating in Max Weber’s work, that European (later, world) society reflects the following fundamental cultural and institutional dynamic: (1) continuing efforts to systematize social life around standardized rules and around schemes that explicitly differentiate and then seek to link means and ends; (2) the ongoing reconstruction of all social organization — both social activities and social actors, including the nation-state itself as an actor — as means for the pursuit of collective purposes, these purposes themselves subject to increasing systematization (Meyer, Boli, and Thomas 1987:24; Scott and Meyer 1994:3). More concretely, “...through rationalization, authority is structured as a formal legal order increasingly bureaucratized; exchange is governed by rules of rational calculation and bookkeeping, rules constituting a market, ... [including] such related processes as monetarization, commercialization, and bureaucratic planning; cultural accounts increasingly reduce society to the smallest rational units — the individual, but also beyond to genes and quarks” (Meyer, Boli, and Thomas 1987:25).

¹² Institutionalists have mostly focused upon the contemporary expansions of formal organizing and their institutional sources. Scott and Meyer stated in 1994 that they have not tried to offer a “general macrosociological model of long-term organizational change” (1994:8), and neither they nor others in the immediate literature have pursued this task. Fligstein (1990) is a partial exception.

¹³ Some appears in Scott and Christensen 1995.

¹⁴ As did their edited volume, Powell and DiMaggio 1991.

¹⁵ Organizations respond to environments via three logics, Scott suggests: instrumentality, appropriateness, and orthodoxy (Scott 1995:35 & Ch. 3). Instrumentality is based in expedience (awareness of possible legal sanctions, for example); appropriateness is based in social obligation (awareness of moral norms, for example); orthodoxy is based in taken-for-grantedness (perceived conceptual correctness, for example). This typology would seem to have quite general utility for social theory.

¹⁶ That is, modern personnel administration developed as a broad ideological movement, and eventually was “institutionalized as standard operating procedure – defined sometimes in law, but often in custom, professional ideologies, and doctrines of proper organizational management — and thus appears in many contexts. These procedures flow from organization to organization, sector to sector, and even country to country, as a collection of culturally defined categories and procedures, and as institutionalized packages supported by a variety of processes. Ultimately, they are taken-for-granted by individuals and organizations as the right way to do things” (Meyer and Scott 1992:1-2).

¹⁷ For this reason, “reform” waves sweep through organizational systems – “management by objectives,” Japanese quality control ideas, “new math” in schools — but with haphazard, seemingly unpredictable, patterns of actual adoption in practices over various local settings (Meyer 1983a). The likelihood of implementation at any location is often hard to predict from local conditions and interest alignments.

¹⁸ For fuller reviews of this application area, see especially: Meyer et al. 1997; Meyer 1999a; Meyer 2000b.

¹⁹ The collaborators included John Boli[-Bennett], Christopher Chase-Dunn, Jacques Delacroix, Jeanne Gobalet, François Nielsen, Francisco Ramirez, Richard Rubinson, George Thomas, and Jane Weiss.

²⁰ For example, features of national constitutions, “information load of exported products,” number of cabinet posts in governments (Meyer and Hannan 1979:6).

²¹ Surprisingly, few studies had done this. Most available studies had pursued relationships among individuals, or among groups, within one or more societies, rather than studying macrosociological connections directly [Meyer and Hannan 1979:4-5.]

²² As used here, “functionalism” does not refer to any specific theory, such as the “structural-functionalism” of classical anthropology or Parsons. Rather it refers to a general imagery: that of a highly bounded and tightly-coupled social “system,” with its structures existing, or having the form that they do, because they are tightly adapted to and facilitative of one another. In the sociology of education, functionalist ideas tend to represent educational structures as filling various needs or requirements (or legitimating requirements) of stratification systems, or (in the neomarxian variant) of specific social classes (Meyer 1986c). From methodological discussions it has become clear that functional imagery is empirically and logically suspect, but that functional arguments of a more narrow-gauged sort, meeting certain analytical requirements, may be legitimate in some cases (Stinchcombe 1968, Elster 1983: Ch. 2).

²³ The language of “imagined society” was imported into the research program later, borrowed from Anderson (1991).

²⁴ One striking example: UNESCO codified the tripartite (6/3/3) categorization of school grade levels to simplify and regularize data collection. This data collection scheme was then implemented as actual organizational structure in many school systems in the world.

²⁵ Later Meyer referred more fully to “a set of models defining the nature, purpose, resources, technologies, control and sovereignty of the proper nation-state” (1999a:123).

²⁶ That is, how is it that in spite of “the differentiating power of the world economy, the state system expands?” (1980:115). Relatedly, the legitimacy of other political forms, such as ethnic or religious polities, or polities based solely in economic associations, has weakened (ibid.:120).

²⁷ For instance, emphasis on national planning is especially common in less-developed countries. Further, sometimes planning cannot realistically be accomplished in these settings, but elites may nevertheless load up constitutions with currently dominant principles and programs – even if these are not to be enacted in practice (Meyer et al. 1997: 155).

²⁸ Reviewed especially in Meyer 1999a and Meyer et al. 1997.

²⁹ Writing about these “scripts” for nation-states, Francisco Ramirez adds that “[m]uch of what is articulated is advisory and much of the advice is sufficiently abstract to allow for cross-national variation in interpretation and implementation. However, it would be difficult to explain the growing isomorphism among nation-states were one not to postulate the common models or blueprints that guide their formation” (Ramirez 2000).

³⁰ However, as with organizational analysis, the macrohistorical side of sociological institutionalism has received less development than one would expect.

³¹ Jepperson 2000 provides more.

³² Meyer, personal communication, August 2000.

³³ See Meyer 1986a for a partial overview of ideas in this research area.

³⁴ Further, in an attempt to study the consolidation and institutionalization of standard life-stages of an individual – core to the construction of a standard individualist identity – Boli studied the incorporation of ideas about child protection and development into the political and ideological systems of many societies. He did so in part by coding references to children in the political constitutions of nation-states, using these references as indicators of the consolidation of a transnational ideology of childhood and individuality (Boli and Meyer 1978).

³⁵ In this project, “individual modernity” referred to a syndrome of “attitudes, values, and dispositions to act,” especially “a thrust toward more instrumental kinds of attitudes and behavior” (Inkeles and Smith 1974: 301, 291). The syndrome included an ideal of informed participant citizenship, an efficacious self-image, values of independence and autonomy, and openness to new experience and ideas (ibid.).

³⁶ In Coleman’s version, a change in the social context (the Protestant Reformation movements) re-socializes individuals, who then behave differently (reflecting “salvation anxiety” and then greater economizing), and then, in aggregate, produce a further change in the context (eventually a more marketized social system) [Coleman 1986]. Coleman seems to insist that the effects of Protestantism must take this form, or that the *major* effect of Protestantism would necessarily take this form, or that one must in any case theorize Protestantism in this form. Each of these claims seems arbitrary and quite problematic. For instance, the institutionalist explanation-sketch is an entirely plausible alternative, in many respects a much more plausible one, yet it does not take the Coleman-prescribed form. (See Collins 1980 for a more collective-level reading of Weber’s argument). However, in principle the institutionalist explanation sketch could be either complementary to or competitive with the Coleman sketch. The point is that this is an empirical matter, not a matter for methodological fiat.

³⁷ In this picture, in changing the dominant theory of collective purpose and progress, Protestantism reworked both the roles and the objectives of priests and lawyers and state elites, who, operating as agents of the changed theory, changed various rules of the societal game. (For example, rich people could subsequently use their money as capital investment, rather than having to buy status and protection.)

³⁸ Ramirez and colleagues have also focused upon the expansion of women’s suffrage in the world system, studying how a highly contested issue became a taken-for-granted feature of political life. (They find that between 1870 and 1940, the extension of voting rights to women is related to domestic features of countries: for instance, the degree of “Westernization” of, and strength of women’s organizations within, a country. However, after this period, such factors appear much less important; instead, external factors seem to be at work: the policies of other countries in a region and in the world at large [Ramirez, Soysal, and Shanahan 1997; Ramirez 2000 for review].)

³⁹ ... and to some degree, to non-humans: conceptions of “animal rights” accord a kind of individuality, and quasi- social membership, to a widening range of “charismatic fauna” (for instance, whales).

⁴⁰ For instance, in 1995 Meyer was recognized for lifetime contributions to the sociology of education by the section on education of the American Sociological Association.

⁴¹ For the characterization of this section I draw especially upon discussion with Marc Ventresca.

⁴² Lynne Zucker has offered thoughts about how to sort out institutionalist versus other resource-dependence claims (Zucker 1987, 1991); Scott addresses the matter as well (1995).

⁴³ For instance, Peter Abell provides an entirely standard and essentially uncomprehending rationalist account of neoinstitutionalism, then relegating institutionalism to mopping up residual variance after rationalists provide a baseline explanation (Abell 1995). Zucker points out that institutionalist claims are often set out again rather global rationalist *perspectives* rather than specific arguments; she concludes, understandably but perhaps hastily, that clean tests are not possible (Zucker 1987:457). Scott (1995:138-40) provides some necessary distinctions.

⁴⁴ Dick Scott's long-standing ecumenical perspective has been particularly important and influential, the perspective in and of itself a major intellectual contribution (Scott 1987, 1995).

⁴⁵ Although Perrow also applauded Meyer and Rowan's piece on the "structure of educational organizations" (1978), and lauded Powell and DiMaggio's edited volume on the new institutionalism in organizational analysis.

⁴⁶ I draw especially upon discussions with Marc Ventresca in this characterization.

⁴⁷ Meyer and Scott 1992; Dobbin 1994a. For instance: "...professionals and state bureaucrats are as much creatures as creators of the ideologies they enact. And the models provided by dominant organizations in sectors or organizational fields may become institutionalized as theories, quite independent of the distribution of advantages created by this institutionalization" (Meyer and Scott 1992:3). They say further that it is not obvious "what interests or powers have driven all sorts of rationalist functions — personnel structures, accounting arrangements, planning departments — into massive numbers of organizations of the world" (Scott and Meyer 1994:5).

⁴⁸ In his review of world system studies, Christopher Chase-Dunn (who originally worked on the Meyer and Hannan-coordinated project) largely marginalized neoinstitutionalist efforts (Chase-Dunn 1989). Recently Wallerstein has acknowledged "world polity" ideas more openly, but has treated their applicability as limited largely to the current period of globalization (e.g., Wallerstein 1991).

⁴⁹ For example, Charles Tilly's reviews of the field initially ignored institutionalist efforts (e.g., Tilly 1984, 1992). Theda Skocpol's initial reviews did acknowledge this institutionalism, but without giving it theoretical centrality (Skocpol 1985).

⁵⁰ While extensively drawing upon neoinstitutionalist conclusions, Tilly also asks for more attention to "mechanisms" linking organizations and states to international models (Tilly 1999:407-409). See Meyer et al. 1997:157-62 for a more-than-usually extended discussion of specific linkages, at least a partial response to Tilly's line of questioning.

⁵¹ So far, sociological neoinstitutionalism tends to be rendered within International Relations in a rather distorted way, as primarily being about "norms" and "socialization" — despite the fact that sociological neoinstitutionalism emerged *against* the emphasis on normative socialization found in Parsons and Robert Merton. Also, political scientists persist in criticizing the program for underplaying "agency" (here, actorhood), thereby ritually asserting their disciplinary identity (power, actors), and missing this institutionalism's intentional defocalizing of actors.

⁵² Thomas and Meyer point out relatedly that "[w]e have better studies of why people vote the way they do than of why there are elections, or of market behavior rather than of why markets are created" (Thomas and Meyer 1984:462).

⁵³ John Boli helped with this characterization of "action" (personal communication).

⁵⁴ See Schneiberg and Clemens (forthcoming) as well as Meyer and Hannan 1979.

⁵⁵ John Boli stressed this feature (personal communication).

⁵⁶ Or even disregarded: for example, Randall Collins can leave the program out of his impressive overviews of sociology's intellectual capital (Collins 1988, 1994).

⁵⁷ This section develops a version of an argument mentioned by Meyer in his interview with Georg Krücken (Krücken 2000:61-62).

⁵⁸ In his original paper on the "world polity," Meyer devoted a section to "rational strategy in peripheral societies" – but generated this from a systemic analysis (Meyer 1980:123-129).



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