PART I

Introduction

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Cultural Institutionalism

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The "sociological neoinstitutionalism" of this volume is a creature of, reaction to, and interpreter of society in the postwar period. The line of thought developed in the 1970s.[1] It emphasizes the way that the "actors" of contemporary society – often taken for granted in both common discourse and (unfortunately) social theory – can usefully be seen as constructions of an evolving rationalistic and individualistic culture.

Informal ideas of this sort are commonplace in ordinary social life. People, even social scientists, wryly understand that those around them – the people they work with, the students they teach, or the troubled patients they counsel – vary greatly from those of the past, carrying thoughts, capacities, and expectations of an entirely distinct spirit. People after hours comment on the different ways in which one must act and talk under changed contemporary cultural conceptions: the new gender dynamics of contemporary life, the new rules of organizational life, the new understanding of problems of the natural environment, or the new demands for transparency in business or personal relationships. These rapidly changing routines in fact reflect dramatic cultural changes that reach all the way up to the global level – for instance, to sweepingly universalistic discussions of human rights in UNESCO and other organs of world society. Such cultural changes have their own history, reflecting the efforts of movements, themselves embedded in previous cultural frames, to change the meaning systems under which social life proceeds.

Noticing such changes, describing them analytically, and attempting to explain them have been the core concerns of the neoinstitutionalism reflected in this book. This introductory chapter provides a brief intellectual history that situates the line of thought.

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1.1 Sociology after Mid-century: The Marginalization of Culture

The emergent field of sociology in the early twentieth century routinely invoked broad cultural frameworks in its explanations. Ideas of folkways and mores, embedded in habits, were standard (Camic 1986). Groups were seen as having customs derived from the past, or from broad religious, political, and legal doctrines that themselves had long histories. National societies were seen as having highly distinctive and causally powerful cultures. People were envisioned as natives and role occupants within their communities, deeply embedded within them in both their identities and mentalities.

Early twentieth-century political science also had a cultural-institutional character. The textbooks of the time typically featured compressed national histories that one was to use to make sense of differences in political dynamics and political behavior. A reference to a then-current French protest would naturally invoke a protest repertoire originating in 1789, or explicate tensions among clerical, aristocratic, and statist models of order. A mid-century text continued to emphasize the abiding French tension between plebiscitary democratic and pseudodemocratic Bonapartist models of political order (Wright 1954).

Various cultural institutionalisms remained standard in social science through the mid-twentieth century. A good example of the explanatory imagery is provided by S. M. Lipset's studies of US/Canada differences (Lipset 1990). Lipset emphasized how the different foundational histories of the two polities – one self-consciously breaking with European ties and traditions, the other not – were reified into distinct "organizing principles," deeply built into a variety of social structures from family to religious groups to the political order. Canadian elites saw themselves as sustaining Tory ideas of rule and social order, just as US ones saw themselves as separating from a stigmatized European Old World. The divergent organizing principles generated different practices of leadership, social control, and welfare.

Related, Talcott Parsons offered a sweeping survey of cultural evolution and its institutionalization in social structures, in *The System of Modern Societies* (an analysis independent from but unfortunately overshadowed by his [in]famous systems theory). S. N. Eisenstadt compared world civilizations over a long career, emphasizing the institutionalization of distinct "cultural premises" (Eisenstadt 1966, 1996).

This form of explanation remains standard in social science, if less present in social theory. For instance, textbook discussions of Japanese society naturally discuss the varying influence of Buddhist, Confucian, and Shinto models in establishing the institutional matrix of Japan (e.g., Schneider and Silverman 2012: ch. 1). The Meiji period is then presented as a stark historical break, opening to external models, while at the same time recovering and refashioning old ideas of imperial sovereignty.

Elements of an explicit social theory of varying cultural-institutional "life-worlds" were synthesized in Berger and Luckmann's *Social Construction of Reality* (1966; also Berger 1963). Distinct cultural worlds were seen as carried and reproduced by various institutional machineries (economy, polity, education), but were also seen as institutionalizations of evolving cultural mythologies (e.g., Durkheim's [1969] "cult of the individual," or American Protestant visions of community). In this picture people inhabit entire "symbolic universes" of folk knowledge and rituals. The lifeworlds contain both standardized identities for people (e.g., in the contemporary system, individual, person, and actor) and the main lines of action for these identities (e.g., occupational, educational, marital, and political choices). Much individual activity is enactment of highly scripted identities, within highly ritualized social dramas (e.g., dramas of progress, at the national level; dramas of self-development and success, at the individual level).

In this "phenomenological" imagery, the cultural system – the particular "life-world" – is causally primary and fundamentally ideological in nature. The identities and lines of behavior of individuals and associations are constructed and derivative from a social scientific standpoint. After all, in the great scheme of things, few people vote when there is no election or go to school where there are no schools; when such institutions exist, vast numbers of people are drawn into them, taking up the associated roles, behavioral scripts, and accounts.

Social Construction is a famous book. Nevertheless the ideas that Berger and Luckmann assembled were not much implemented in empirical research programs, at least in the US intellectual context. This is a striking outcome, given the range and seeming power of the ideas. Instead, as American sociology evolved in the 1960s and beyond, it sustained a would-be structural analysis, but marginalized, or individualized and psychologized, the attention to "lifeworlds."[2]

It is important to understand why constructionist ideas were marginalized, and sometimes aggressively excluded, in mainstream American sociological thought. Mainly, they cross a Red Line, by failing to emphasize the "free will" or agency attributed to individual actors, and to the organizations derived from these actors (including the US state), in institutionalized cultural doctrine (Meyer 2010).

1.2 The Red Line

A phenomenological orientation did not fit well with the new folk culture and social structure of the postwar period. That complex dramatically expanded the constitutional individualism of American culture, intensified in reaction to the disastrously failed statisms and corporatisms of European society, and the continuing threats of a cold war. In parallel, a more self-consciously professional and intendedly relevant social science reified much of the new culture, taking for granted many of its cultural assumptions, and accordingly becoming less interested in analyzing them. It was as if society was now, finally, a truly "real" system, made up of very real entities – especially individuals. With social and economic progress, humankind had finally transcended the arbitrary cultural confinements of a primitive past. Society was, now, stripped to its essentials, and the individuals in it were similarly hardwired purposive entities. (See Chapter 2 of this volume, "Society without Culture.") To depart from such conceptions, which were simultaneously academic theories and normative standards, was to cross a line. To disrespect the almost magical rights and powers of the (especially American) individual was a normative and intellectual violation, and often a violation of proper methodological standards. To properly understand social structures, one must understand the points of view of the "actors" within them. This idea was reasonable enough, but in practice it frequently led to the mistaken assumption that these points of view produce the social structure and changes in it. Historical and cultural forces then easily disappear in such analyses.

The glorification of the capacity of individual and organizational participants to modify their own worlds through action marginalized a more traditional analysis of human society as rooted in cultural meanings. A broad understanding of culture was reduced to its contemporary weakened forms. Culture came to mean mostly the set of goals and ideals animating the individual or organizational members of

society. Survey research, along with aggregate ideas and definitions of culture, became more central. Culture became "tools" or "affordances" that people use (as in Swidler's [1986] influential analysis). Or to a lesser extent, culture could be the set of goals and ideals built into the polity – typically, the national state. The idea that people, their actions, and social structures are embedded in a larger set of meanings receded.

The liberalism of the period – in the broad historical sense – clearly seems causally implicated in these intellectual developments. Liberalism of one form or another was a dominant ideology of the postwar period. The liberal project reconstructed the institutional framework of society around a template of rationalized human actorhood, and the more recent neoliberal version intensified it (compare Ruggie 1982 and 1998). The new postwar individualism, the "society of organizations," expanded states, and a worldwide state system were outcomes in both theory and practice.

Social science rapidly shifted to treat these constructions as primordial actors in history, dropping an older standard cultural-institutionalism along the way. Individuals, given their normative centrality, were especially stressed. The fields of economics and psychology grew and gained policy centrality (Frank et al. 1995). Sociology shifted to emphasize social psychological processes. The field of anthropology destabilized. Overall, even history moved to focus on individuals – not just "great men" – rather than authorities and institutions. A taste for reductionism, as well as methodological individualism, became commonplace, and then dominant (see Chapters 6–8 of this volume). Much social theory, in other words, quickly became part of the contemporary cultural world, falling into society, rather than analyzing its foundational culture and structures.

The intensive emphasis on individuals and organizations as independent entities finally did provoke a reactive interest in the institutions that regulate systems involving these actors. Institutions began to reappear in social theory in the 1970s and 1980s. However, they were largely seen as "constraints" on the taken-for-granted social actors – a conceptualization far distant from Berger and Luckmann's cultural-institutional "worlds." Culture might appear as a few "rules" – for example, property rights or Westphalian sovereignty – thought to be essential for society as a largely economic or political game. Much purportedly institutionalist literature, in economics but

also political science, was not actually much concerned with institutions, let alone with the broader meaning systems that they embody. Instead, it was about the ways in which coherent (and sometimes rational) actors are thought to build them, use them, resist them, and seek to change them. That was the primary interest.

The reification of actors ended up creating a considerable embarrassment for American sociology. Many of the sweeping social changes of the contemporary period are rooted in a changing cultural meaning system. Inattentive to this system, the field of sociology has produced limited analysis of the most striking social changes of the period. Analyses poorly account for the rise of a global environment movement that completely transcends local environmental problems. The discipline gives weak accounts of the whole raft of social changes around gender and the family system: worldwide increases in the status of women (including divorce and abortion rights), the recognition and legitimation of homosexuality, the legalization of the status of children, the liberations of sexual expression, current experiments with biological sex, and so on. The field deals poorly with the dramatic (and global) declines in the legitimacy of racial and ethnic and now national distinctions, with the dramatic rise of human rights ideologies. Most sociologies do not well explain the explosive rise in institutions of education at every level and in every country. They give feeble interpretations of global expansions in formal organization, elaborations of organizational structures, and demands for organizational transparency, social responsibility, and internal rectitude (Bromley and Meyer 2015). These institutional changes are not a primary interest.

In all these areas, descriptive empirical work routinely shows dramatic and often worldwide changes. Informal conversations constantly call attention to them. Explanatory models, however, are absent or primitive. Contemporary sociologists, for instance, certainly notice informally the extraordinary expansion of female participation in public society – many of them after all are women, who know they would not have been in the room a few decades ago. But if asked to explain the dramatic social change, few sociologists would have any convincing answer: even fewer would be able to coherently explain why the change is worldwide. Sociologists have focused upon changes within taken-for-granted cultural frames, not for the most part changes in the frames themselves.

1.3 The Neoinstitutional Perspective of This Book

The "sociological neoinstitutionalism" of this volume has focused on analyzing such changes. It treats the "actorhood" of modern individuals and organizations as itself constructed out of cultural materials – and treats contemporary institutional systems as working principally by creating and legitimating agentic actors with appropriate perspectives, motives, and agendas. The scholars who have developed this perspective have been less inclined to emphasize actors' use of institutions and more inclined to envision institutional forces as producing and using actors. By focusing on the evolving construction and reconstruction of the actors of modern society, institutionalists can better explain the dramatic social changes of the contemporary period – why these changes cut across social contexts and functional settings, and why they often become worldwide in character.

In this theoretical picture, the behavior of actors – the "action" itself – is as much a product of a script as the choice of an actor. The scripts are rooted, for instance, in ideologies of rights and human capital, and in highly simplified pictures of society (featuring an idealized polity, economy, family system, and religious order). Such ideologies certainly do depict contemporary actors as filled with choices and decisions. But much of this behavior is highly institutionalized, with the ideas about "action" in large part an overlay of "accounts" of activity (a "vocabulary of motives" [Mills 1940]). For example, the choices of contemporary young people to complete secondary school or attend college are generally understood to make good rational sense. Yet, many young people complete these steps without having decided to do so – they simply take it all for granted and follow along the conventionalized pathway. They are actors in a theatrical sense, not the senses employed in contemporary sociological thought. They may be rational (or intendedly rational) in some respects, but they are not, in the main, the actors imagined in much social theory. And because they are embedded in highly institutionalized and changing cultural scripts, an explosion in now-routinized "going to college" can become an astonishing worldwide script directing masses of young people in every country (Schofer and Meyer 2005).

There is no reason to suppose all these young persons are particularly irrational – indeed the script about education for both individual and collective progress is deeply institutionalized, and social and

economic returns to education have been high. Rational or not, however, the question is whether and in what sense these people should be considered real actors as envisioned in much social theory. From an institutionalist point of view, their actorhood is itself a greatly expanded script in the modern order. And since actorhood is prominently a script, rationality becomes difficult (sometimes even impossible) to define.[3] More generally, if the core units making up the modern order are cultural constructions, rationality becomes a tautology.

Overall, the theoretical ideas presented in this book are distinct from more conventional lines of social theory along several axes. First, the conception of culture is much broader than an imagery of individual attitudes, whether about politics or gods. We include great areas of institutionalized doctrine as central cultural material: microeconomic theory, for instance, or scientific medicine as a set of principles, or psychological doctrines of individual empowerment – professional and pseudo-professional knowledges (in the sense of Foucault) of every sort. All sorts of schemes have cultural standing far over and above both social structures and individuals. They operate as frameworks for the creation and behavior of actors.

Second, the ideas here emphasize the cultural elaborateness and dependence of the actor identities. Far removed from any natural or functional aspects, the contemporary actor is a model – a highly theorized one, and hence ordinarily a very unrealistic one. This is why, in practically all contemporary societies, the ordinary individual person is seen as clearly "not good enough." Almost everywhere, a decade or more of carefully organized reconstruction through the medium of compulsory formal education is demanded. Even after all this forced socialization, people interact with a wide range of others – therapists, trainers, consultants – who bring a continuous supply of the ingredients for actorhood down to the inadequate individual. Similar huge consulting industries operate exoskeletally to sustain modern organizations and national states as actors. The expanded standards of actorhood produced and intensified in the whole postwar (liberal and neoliberal) period mean that every natural person can be seen as failed or inadequate, requiring much schooling and therapy. Every organization requires regulation and reform. Every national state is a partially or entirely failed state.