



## *Institutional Theory*

Over the past three decades, Meyer, Jepperson, and colleagues have contributed to the development of one of the leading approaches in social theory, by analyzing the cultural frameworks that have shaped modern organizations, states, and identities. Bringing together key articles and new reflections, this volume collects the essential theoretical ideas of “sociological neoinstitutionalism.” It clarifies the core ideas and situates them within social theory writ large. Among other topics, the authors discuss the changing nature of the “actors” that have operated within contemporary social structure. The book concludes with the evolving frameworks that have structured social activity in the post–World War II period of “embedded liberalism,” in the more recent neoliberal period, and in an emergent post-liberal period that appears to be a radical departure.

RONALD L. JEPPELSON is Associate Professor of Sociology, emeritus, at the University of Tulsa, where he taught social science, philosophy, and critical thinking to undergraduates. Previously he was a faculty member at the University of Washington, and a visiting professor at Stanford University, the University of California-Berkeley, and the European University Institute.

JOHN W. MEYER is Professor of Sociology, emeritus, at Stanford University. His research has focused on comparative sociology, education, and formal organizations, employing and developing neo-institutional theory, emphasizing the dependence of modern social structure on wider and often global cultural frameworks. He has published widely and received many academic honors.

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# Institutional Theory

The Cultural Construction of Organizations,  
States, and Identities

RONALD L. JEPPELSON  
*University of Tulsa*

JOHN W. MEYER  
*Stanford University, California*



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## *Preface*

Over the past thirty years the authors have produced a set of articles that draw upon and develop one of the main “new institutionalisms” in social science. The central concern of this line of thought is how broad contemporary cultural changes – for example, in religious or political ideas – are “institutionalized” in core social structures (such as legal systems, professions, and organizational structures), and construct both actors and collective action systems. Hence this research program, with the involvement of many scholars, examines the cultural bases of formal organizations, states, and identities. As a cultural institutionalism, the perspective is distinct from the more economics-inspired institutionalisms that have also emerged in recent decades. Put simply, this line of thought takes an “anthropological” view of modern society, in the connotative sense of the term.

The material in this book takes off from earlier institutionalist analyses, as we indicate throughout. Most directly, the work in this volume is based on the sociological neoinstitutionalism that influenced sociology beginning in the 1970s.<sup>1</sup>

This book presents both previously published articles (from 1988 through 2011) and newly written pieces. The previously published elements (some coauthored, some individually written) concern fundamental issues in social theory. They have separately received a good deal of attention. However, they were published in disparate outlets. Any given reader may only have easy access to some of them and may not be aware of companion pieces. Accordingly, this volume provides the articles as a set.

In addition, we add five newly written coauthored pieces. Chapter 1 provides a new basic introduction to the line of social theory and three other chapters provide current reflections on the topics of the previously published articles. A new concluding chapter (Chapter 12) applies the line of social theory by analyzing the cultural frameworks of three historical periods: the post-World War II period of “embedded

liberalism,” the more recent neoliberal period, and the emergent post-liberal period.

The book is organized in the following way. After the introduction just mentioned, the chapters cluster around three topics: the foundations of institutional theory, the multiple levels of analysis involved in social theory, and the nature of the “actors” within contemporary social structure. These sections are followed by the concluding chapter described in the preceding paragraph. We introduce the specific chapters of the volume in more detail at the end of the introductory chapter.

A note on the use of the pronoun “we” in the coauthored pieces of this volume: It’s just the editorial “we” used for convenience. It would be tedious and distracting to try to specify individual responsibility for statements or to indicate any differences in emphasis. We share equal responsibility for the new chapters in this book (Chapters 1, 5, 8, 11, and 12), those chapters going back and forth between us multiple times. Related, the ordering of author names for the book is merely alphabetical, reflecting the general shared responsibility for the volume.

The work in this book arises not only from our own efforts but also from the ideas and research of a community of institutionalist scholars. It has been a shared enterprise. We report the contributions of our collegial compatriots in the acknowledgments and citations in the separate chapters of this book.

We would also like to acknowledge the support and assistance of Valerie Appleby (commissioning editor at Cambridge University Press), Tobias Ginsberg (senior editorial assistant), and Liisa Salomaa (our research assistant for this book project). We also have benefited from the work of Laura Simmons, Gayathri Tamilselvan, Anitha Nadarajan, and Jim Diggins in the production of the book. Finally, we appreciate the permission to include previously published articles received from the University of Chicago Press, Greenwood Publishing Group, Oxford University Press, Rowman & Littlefield, SAGE Publications, and Stanford University Press.

## Notes

1. J. Meyer, “The Effects of Education as an Institution,” *American Journal of Sociology* (1977) 83:55–77; J. Meyer & B. Rowan, “Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony,” *American*

*Journal of Sociology* (1977) 83:340–63; J. Meyer & B. Rowan, “The Structure of Educational Organizations,” pp. 78–109 in *Environments and Organizations* (1978), edited by M. W. Meyer, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; J. Meyer, “The World Polity and the Authority of the Nation-State,” pp. 109–137 in *Studies of the Modern World-System* (1980), edited by A. Bergesen, New York, NY: Academic Press; J. Meyer & W. R. Scott, *Organizational Environments: Ritual and Rationality* (1983), Beverly Hills: SAGE.

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