Reflections: Institutional Theory and World Society*

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Reflections: Institutional Theory and World Society

Sociological institutional (or neo-institutional) theory, as it has developed since the 1970s, has provided a useful perspective which to understand the rise, nature, and impact of the modern world order or society. For many decades, social theories maintained postures that made it difficult to think of the world as a society, and theorists who did so (e.g., Peter Heintz 1972, Roland Robertson 1992; Niklas Luhmann 1975; Bull and Watson 1984) tended to be the exceptions. Rather than a society, the world was seen as anarchical (by realists in political science) or as an economy without a regulating polity (by world systems students following Wallerstein 1974).

The core problem was that the social sciences are themselves creatures of the post-Enlightenment nation-state system. Thus they tend, mostly implicitly (as in Parsons' work), to conceive of societies as coterminous with nations and states. Societies were interdependent systems managed by an over-riding sovereign organization. Since the world did not have a sovereign state, and global interdependence was recognized in only a limited way, the world was by definition not a society.

Institutional theory, particularly in its more sociological versions, dramatically changed that. Along with many other post-functionalist lines of thought, it emphasized a cultural conception of society as an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983), rather than a more realist model of actors involved in functional interdependencies. And it emphasized broad cultural themes and shifts in wider social environments as impacting actors of all sorts – organizations, but also individuals (Chapters XX, XX; Meyer and Rowan 1977). The application of this line of thought to conceptualizing a world society and its impact was straightforward. Institutional theory made it easy to conceive of the world as a society, and to analyze the impact of that society on all sorts of subunits, including national states. Further, in a point I emphasize below, institutional theory described and called attention to great movements in world society given neither description nor explanation in much more conventional social theory. So institutional theory, in addition to
its explanatory role, has played a descriptive role. It calls attention to important features of the modern world order given little attention in earlier lines of thought.

World society, in this vision, is a good deal more than the set of actors (individuals, organizations, national states) envisioned in much more realist and functionalist social theory. And it is more than the transactions of power and exchange among such actors. The modern world is filled with shared understandings of nature, humans, and society. And it is filled with understandings of a directly collective reality in a physical, moral, and social world (Jepperson and Swidler 1993-4). Obviously, many understandings in the world are not shared, but vary across many dimensions. And many understandings are in no sense linked to conceptions of a common collective order, but rather envision only subunits. The surprising feature of the contemporary world is how much is shared, and how strong collectivity is perceived, not that global unification is in any sense universal.

Thus, world society is filled with associations, of little agency for action, speaking to great collective goods (as with the World Wildlife Fund and the environment, or Amnesty International, or a variety of treaty organizations). It is filled with supra-national professions, like the scientific and legal and social scientific and medical and educational elites, that speak great supra-national truths to all the actors of the world. It is filled with social movements along all these axes, half-organizations and half-professional or ideological. And it is filled with nation-states shifting from their role as actors within a world society to postures of agency for collective truth and virtue of this society: leading national states routinely parade themselves as instances of collective goods (the Americans illustrating enterprise and freedom; the Swedes sober community responsibility; the former Communists equality).

All this prominent social material makes up an envisioned world society, of variable significance across social sectors and social regions. It is organized around collective goods – completely collective goods like the reified welfare of Mother Earth, and densely shared common interests like the health of the world exchange system. And orientation toward it clearly penetrates, in many social sectors, far down into ordinary social life, as local people and organizations respond to global environmental problems, or
problems of violations of human rights. Much social theory is inattentive to the dramatic expansions of such orientations, and focused only on the internal dynamics of actors and their interdependencies. This has made it difficult for social scientists to explain whole great currents and movements of a more collective kind in the contemporary world (e.g., the environmental or human rights movement, or the worldwide movement for organizational reforms). Interestingly, the same limitations apply to the social scientific analyses of historic Christendom — often seen more as parts than as a culturally constituted whole — and have made it difficult to understand many aspects of the long-term “rise of the West” (see Mann 1986 for a related analysis). A continuing conceptual problem in the more realist social sciences is a very thin conception of culture: at the world level, the term is more likely to refer to some musical tastes than to the academic field of economics, or the highly developed doctrines of environmentalism.

I begin (I) by reviewing the distinctive features of sociological institutional theory, and in particular the more phenomenological versions that are useful in thinking about world society. Then I discuss (II) why this line of theorizing prospers in discussions of world society — that is, the features of world society that reflect processes theorized by the line of theory. In important ways, the kind of variables emphasized in institutional theory play very prominent roles in the post-World War II world. So the theory describes and calls attention to, as well as offers explanations of, major historical developments. (III) I then turn to a substantive review of the core theoretical themes or propositions involved. These involve the factors affecting the construction and expansion of modern “actorhood,” creating powers and responsibilities for actors far beyond the plausible. The culture of the modern system greatly elaborates the imagined capacities and responsibilities of individuals, organizations, and national states, endowing them with extraordinarily agentic properties. (IV) This review leads to an emphasis on Durkheimian aspects of contemporary world society — the extent to which this society contains (and is in good part and imagined community constructed by) a collective cultural cosmology that penetrates very deeply into the identity and activity structures of the modern world. And it leads to an emphasis on the social forces that rapidly expand this cosmology, providing instruction and therapy and consulting advice for actors from individuals to national states.
I. Institutional Theories

As the social sciences developed after the Enlightenment period, they routinely conceptualized human activity as deeply institutionalized -- highly embedded in collective cultural patterns. People were creatures of habit, groups of customs, and societies of culture. Analyses consisted of models, often evolutionary, of variations in these habits and cultures, and of their changes over time.

At the same time, however, the Enlightenment generated many ideas that “man,” now possessing formerly-divine powers, could use his developing knowledge of nature and society purposively, to accomplish his goals (Foucault 1994). Man, in this connection meant, variously, individual human persons in liberal contexts, and nation-states in statist ones (Toulmin 1990). And over time it came mean the bureaucracies derived from states, and the organizations constructed by individuals. In all these conceptions, persons, states, organizations and bureaucracies were no longer seen as creatures of habit and culture: they were bounded and purposive and competent actors. In the twentieth century, indeed, the word habit disappeared from the social scientific vocabulary, and the word “actor” became central (Camic 1986). The choice of words is odd – in ordinary usage, it implies a person playing a role written by someone else. But in social science, it means something like a goal oriented, bounded, integrated, technically effective entity.

With the rise of conceptions of modern society as built up around and by effective purposive actors, an intellectual division of labor developed. Primitive societies, the main focus of anthropology, were seen as embedded in culture. And to some extent, pre-modern societies in the west could be seen in the same way, as creatures of history. But in the social sciences focusing on modernity – economics, sociology, psychology, political science, and so on – preferred analyses increasingly traced causal processes to the bottom-line choices and preferences of human actors (Meyer 1988). Institutions remained, of course, but now these institutions were seen as choices of human actors, or as values deeply internalized by these actors. Modern humans and their groups, in short, created institutions and history, rather than being products of these elements.
With some simplification, one can call these emergent theoretical and normative emphases as realist (Chapter XX), and I employ this term for them here. They have a micro-social emphasis, in that they stress the centrality of the subunit actors rather than the wider system (e.g., individuals in societies, nation-state actors in the world). And they are realist in that they tend to see the actors involved as quite hard-wired entities, and the relations and interactions among these actors as quite tangible expressions of the material forces of power and exchange.

World War II gave great impetus to this general line of thought. Notions of humans and their society as embedded in collective culture were disparaged with the stigmatization of corporatism and statism, and liberal conceptions of the actorhood of people and groups greatly strengthened. Individuals could be liberated, and social psychologies proliferated. Groups could be rational organizations, and organization theory blossomed. Societies, with rational decisionmaking and planning (Hwang 2006), could all develop and progress, and associated theories in economics and political science elaborated. The more culturally based institutions of the past and the primitive world could be overcome with education and rationality. In general, institutions, when recognized, got a bad reputation, as loci of inertia and irrationality: the unfortunate dependence of man on history, rather than history on man (Meyer 1988).

In this emergent social science of the post-War period, institutions were recognized, but as rather derivative structures. They were products of human action and decision, and could be produced and structured in rational ways by highly purposive (and often self-interested) actors. Society could be subjected to rational analysis, and the analyses used for policy purposes. So the dramatic twentieth century expansion of the social sciences intensified, in the composition of university faculties (Frank and Gabler 2006) and student enrollments (Drori and Moon 2006).

By the early 1970s, the extreme liberal optimism involved in these patterns faded. Development theories of society, institutionalized as policy, did not produce spectacular progress. Rationalistic organizational theory ran up against constant empirical findings of great gaps between the plans and policies of formal
organization and the realities of practice in informal structure (e.g., Dalton 1959; Meyer and Rowan 1977). And studies of individual persons demonstrated great inconsistencies between the theoretical autonomous actorhood of individuals and their practical embeddedness in taken-for-granted culture and relationships.

Thus in every social science (except anthropology and history, where the old institutionalisms never died out), new institutionalisms developed. Nation-states, formal organizations, and individuals – the “actors” of the new system – were conceived to be dependent on some sort of institutional structure. These new (or neo-) institutionalisms differed from the old one in one very crucial way. In the new or neo- version, institutional structures worked by affecting and controlling and constraining “actors” – that is, people and groups with real or imagined properties as fairly bounded, autonomous, purposive, rational, and sovereign entities, capable of considerable technical skill and enormous self-control, and possessed of discrete resources. So in this new scheme, national states, rather than being embedded in history and culture, became actors operating under an institutional frame. So also, organizations were seen as actors rather than groups, and were similarly seen to operate under institutional constraints and opportunities. And individual persons came similarly to be seen as highly agentic social actors.

*The New Institutionalisms*

An expanded recognition of the important of institutional contexts in affecting social activity has characterized social scientific thinking over the last three decades. But there are sharp differences among lines of theorizing in the extent and character of the driving institutional contexts recognized, and in the degree to which social actors are thought to be affected, penetrated, or constituted by the institutional forces. Many modern social scientific issues are between institutionalisms, rather than between institutional thinking and entirely distinct lines of thought. The issues are reviewed in many discussions: Jepperson (2002) is especially relevant here, but also see the broad reviews by Scott (2001), and Hasse and Kruecken (2005).
For simplicity, I lay out the distinctions among institutionalisms on a single dimension, though multiple components are involved. At one pole, there is realist institutionalism, with (a) very strong conceptions of the priority, boundedness, autonomy, and rationality of actors, and limited conceptions of the effects of any institutions, (b) notions of institutions as clear and operative rules rather than diffuse meaning systems, and (c) very narrow or limited conceptions of the important institutional environments which constrain and empower actors. At the other pole, there is phenomenological institutionalism, with (a) notions of actors as constructed by institutional models and meanings, rather than as prior and fixed entities, (b) conceptions of institutions as cultural meanings rather than narrow organizational rules, and (c) very broad conceptions of institutions as general models constructing both actors and their activities. Thus:

At the realist extreme, we find ideas in economics that the whole modern system is made up of very strong actors and the single institutional rule of property rights (North and Thomas 1973). Parallel ideas in the political science field of international relations treat nation-states as actors in a completely anarchical context, except of the single institutional principle of state sovereignty (Krasner 1999). Both lines of thought have tended to soften over time (e.g., North 1981, Mokyr 1992), with the empirical recognition of more and more elements of institutional contexts. In both cases, the emphasis on a social world of strong actors and anarchic contexts is so strong that there is a tendency to see the putatively single institutional rules crucial to modernity (that is, property rights, or national sovereignty) as having arisen almost by accident (e.g., at Westphalia in the case of sovereignty), since actors themselves are unlikely to cooperate in any trustworthy fashion.

Less extreme positions in political science (and economics) add elements to the institutional environment, and conceive the social actors as somewhat more penetrated or penetrable (see Katzenstein, ed. 1996 for examples). Thus, political scientists imagine the environment contains “norms,” and the actors involve may have created these norms (the more realist position) or become socialized to prior norms (slightly less realist). A norm might be “don’t use chemical weapons,” or “treat your enemies’ emissaries civilly.”
Standard middle-of-the-road institutionalism in political science conceives international society as a regime made up of a variety of organizations and rules (e.g., Krasner 1983), and as having a good deal of cultural content perhaps generated and controlled by professional epistemic communities (Haas 1992).

This line of thought is central in modern sociology. The locus classicus is DiMaggio and Powell (1983), and broader summaries can be found in Powell and DiMaggio (1991) and Scott (2001 and elsewhere). The “regime” is here called the “organizational field,” and the cultural content is again understood to be controlled and generated by professions. By and large, thinking in this important sociological tradition has a realist cast. So the institutional environment controls and empowers actors through coercive organizational powers and professional norms (Scott 2001 has a related typology).

But DiMaggio and Powell (1983) added an additional element in discussing the impact of institutional rules on actors: they called it “mimetic isomorphism,” by which actors incorporate institutional rules by taking them for granted without much decision or reflection. At this point, actors are no longer actors in the realist sense, and we are in the domain of more phenomenological institutionalism.

This line of sociological thought, as it arose in the 1970s, is commonly traced to Meyer and Rowan (1977, and elsewhere), which in turn has links back to earlier phenomenological thinking (esp. Berger and Luckmann 1967). Here, the conception of institution is very broad – whole edited and translated models of the world and effective activity in it, culturally (Czarniawska and Sevón, eds. 1996); and whole arrangements of organizations and roles and relations, structurally. And the actors in this institutional system are conceived as constructed and constituted by it, deriving much of their purpose, technical rationality, boundedness, and sovereignty from the institutional environment. So the line of thought is centrally sociological in character, in its analysis of the modern system, conceiving not only of social action as highly constructed, but social actors too: we will thus call the line of argument sociological institutionalism, or just institutionalism (see the review by Jepperson 2002).
As illustrative imagery, here, if a realist looks at the silver screen of social life and perceives a John Wayne, he imagines that this reflects a real true John Wayne. The sociological institutionalist supposes that what he sees is a very ordinary actor (perhaps even a wimp) playing the part of the John Wayne— a part written by a screenwriter who isn’t an actor at all, and who may not know how many legs a horse has.

Of course, in the wider world society to which we attend, the “scriptwriter” is a historical-cultural drama. For example, a 900-year history builds the great institutional complex we call the university, with the deepest cultural legitimations (notions about nature, rationality, the truth, and so on) and the most diverse specific instantiations (e.g., detailed analyses of a specific flower, or the culture of teenagers). And the constructed actors are the individuals and groups taking identities as actors within this drama (e.g., the intellectual protagonists, as in Collins 1998). And the participants turn out, despite their exotic roles, to be ordinary people with clay feet. So we recognize, in the great gaps between the postures of the renowned intellectual “actors,” and the realities of their daily life and practice, that a great deal of institutional construction has gone on.

As another example, a long much-discussed history produces the complex of legitimations and meanings we call capitalism, or the modern economy (Jepperson and Meyer 2007). Elaborate and intense interpretive scripts are written, so that all sorts of odd actor roles and identities are formed— a complex system of definitions turns friendly advice into expensive therapy, or a song into a worldwide commodity. And enormous energy is put into the playing of stressful roles (laborer, entrepreneur, and so on) far removed from ordinary human life.

Institutional theory has been central in sociological thinking about world society. It offers descriptive and explanatory imagery about the organization of this society, about how and why models of national and individual actors are generated, and about how they play out in practice.

**The Red Line**: But it must be emphasized that this theoretical perspective creates a certain discomfort in American sociology, and is often seen as in conflict with more realist perspectives. This is not really for
theoretical or methodological reasons of a scientific character – the various institutional perspectives are
not sharply inconsistent, and multivariate analyses can easily show the impact on particular outcomes of a
wide variety of institutional forces. The problem is normative. The American economy, political system,
and culture rest strikingly for their legitimation on principles of actorhood – particularly individual
actorhood. The notion that actors are themselves constructions importantly violates a whole normative
order that is deeply built into American social theory (e.g., Coleman 1986; see Jepperson and Meyer 2007
for an analysis). Thus the phenomenological tradition, starting exactly at the point where DiMaggio and
Powell noted a shift from coercive and normative institutional influences on actors to mimetic
isomorphism, has been the target of considerable tension of an ultimately normative sort (e.g., Hirsch
1997). In fact, DiMaggio (1988) later made a kind of apology for his transgression – an apology paralleled
also by Scott (2006). There is a sort of red line, in American social theory, exactly between more realist
mechanisms and the idea of mimetic isomorphism, which denies the ultimate primacy of humans seen as
small gods (or “actors”). Interestingly, the issue is much less central in European thought, where there are
many parallels to sociological institutionalism in the work of Foucault (e.g. 1991) and his followers (e.g.,
Rose and Miller 1992), of Luhmann (e.g., 1975) and the later system theorists, of all sorts of post-modern
thinkers, and of Giddens (1984). The tensions about institutionalism in European thought reflect European
tendencies toward functional models of collective purpose, often left-wing or critical ones. European
intellectuals find it easy to understand that the individual is probably not a primordial purposive and
rational or reasonable actor, but retain some belief that the king (or another sort of collective normative
order) might be.

The tensions between institutional thinking and the modern normative emphasis on the priority and
autonomy of actors have played out in many arenas of secondary relevance here. For instance, there is an
odd reprise of the 19th century discussions of free will versus determinism. The issue now is the tension
between the idea of structural or institutional effects and the modern doctrines, highly legitimated, of
human agency (see Sewell 1992, and an enormous subsequent literature, mostly American, on this oddly
formulated problem).
If sociological institutionalism runs against some normative currents in American social science, the question arises of why it has prospered so well in recent decades, generating a good deal of social research and receiving much attention. The answer, centrally, relates to the extremely rapid globalization characteristic of the last half century.

II. Globalization, World Society, and Institutional Theory

The period since World War II has seen a dramatic increase in the long-term world tendency toward the actualities and perceptions of global integration. The world of conflicting but autonomous national-states had run into disaster: it was seen as having created two crushing world wars, a massive global depression, gigantic deliberate destruction of human life including a Holocaust, and now a set of political conflicts between nuclear powers with the capacity to destroy life. It also confronted a most unruly set of social conditions, with much of the world escaping controlling empires and becoming independently acting national states. Further, rapid economic growth and change generated large scale interdependencies no longer under secure (e.g., imperial) control. In view of the disasters of the century, the dramatically increased perceived interdependence, and the obvious fact that the primordial nationalist state was more problem than solution, new visions were obviously needed.

The natural resolution to the recognition of such expanding interdependencies, in the history of the Western system, has been the creation and expansion of larger-scale controlling state organization. For a variety of reasons, this solution was not viable in the period. A weak United Nations was built, and eventually a weak western European organization. Some other regional associations and treaties were set up, too. But nothing remotely resembling a true world state was conceivable, and the intellectual fantasies about a world federation characteristic of the previous hundred years or so essentially disappeared.

Given the threats and opportunities of rapidly expanding interdependence, and the absence of any state-building possibilities, other coordinating social and cultural structures evolved. The parallels with the
construction of the United States in the nineteenth century, as analyzed by Tocqueville (1836 [1969]), are striking.

A host of intergovernmental and especially non-governmental associations sprang up, devoted to the widest range of possible collective goods (Boli and Thomas 1999). On the governmental level, these were often far from classic self-interest associations, and espoused broad goals related to general matters of global concern: regulating the sea-bed or Antarctica, or supporting science or human rights. Nation-states in this sense functioned as script-writers for a new world rather than actors in it. This is even more true of the exponentially-expanding non-governmental system, through which the broadest range of collective goods has been promulgated: global scientific and medical and educational associations (Doctors Without Borders); organizations for the protection of human rights or endangered species (the World Wildlife Fund); advocates of global linguistic reform like Esperanto. These structures function primarily as script-writers, telling actors how to posture and behave in the good of the whole collectivity, rather than the interested actors of realist theory – I have sometimes called them “others,” to contrast them with interested actor identities (see Chapter XXX; Meyer 1999). The notion describes participants that function less as interested actors than as agents of collective goods and realities. They are thus less interested actors than significant or generalized others in the Meadian sense, addressing on general or universal principles what the imagined actors in the system should be like and what they should do.

The new global structures, and the societies within them, were at every point filled with rapidly expanding and globally-integrating professions. These have been expanding exponentially around the world, carrying supra-national models of activity commonly defined as in the interests of the most universal and most collective goods. They generally lack political or economic control authority, but are renowned as script-writers and consultants, instructing and advising the national, organizational, and individual actors of the modern system. They are not really actors, in the standard senses, but rather agents of wider principles – they tell actors how to be and what to do (Meyer and Jepperson 2000). Thus the term “others.” Social scientists are good examples. Economists provide universal prescriptions for progress and development, sociologists for human equality, and political scientists for proper governance. But similarly, medical
professionals create worldwide standards, as do biologists and ecologists and engineers. And ultimately, actorhood management itself becomes a profession, and business schools with MBA programs spread all over the world (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, eds., 2002; Moon and Wotipka 2006).

The problems confronted by the collectively-oriented associations, professions, and actors of the post-War world, and the absence of any real possibility for authoritative resolution, have driven the properties of the world society they came to imagine. First, inevitably many of the resolutions they could produce in order to be successful had to take a broadly cultural form: no authoritative organization was possible. Second, the cultural rules and ideas developed had to be selected to promote a dream of a shared and collective and unified world, not one filled with threatening conflicts. Third, the world culture generated clearly had to locate ideologically its action principles, not in the absent central organizations, but in properly tamed or constructed versions of the legitimated participants in world society: national states, first of all, but also individuals and organizations. Thus, a broadly coherent set of constraints produced the evolution of the modern world culture, eliminating or subordinating many themes (e.g., the class conflicts emphasized by the Communists; or the excessively nationalist ideologies of the authoritarians; or the conflictful religious ideas arising out of previous world orders) that threatened possibilities for a new order.

Thus, we can consider how all these universalistic professionals, collective good organizations, and ordinary actors posturing as models and agents of the collective good, worked to construct order in a rapidly integrating, but stateless world? Two core questions were involved. (1) First, on what bases could they construct rules and realities of the new world society that appeared so obviously necessary? An imagined and desired world order would obviously require rule systems, but the absence of a proper global state made positive law difficult to formulate and legitimate. (2) Second, what were the bottom-line components of the new system? The absence of a world state made it necessary to find or create loci of ultimate responsibility for the new order. An obvious possibility in the Western cultural system involved the formulation some very strong notions of rather sacralized actorhood, but who were the actors? Nationalism, and the sovereign national state, were very poor, partial, and delegitimated candidates, given the history.
The successful answers to these questions produced by the associations and professionals and posturing national agents giving birth to the new order have dominated the culture of world society throughout the post-War period. They reflect the same logics Tocqueville noted in interpreting an older American history. The answers take the form of formulations with something of a natural law character (in this case locating laws in science and rationality, rather than explicit religious ideas), given the absence of possible positive law bases (Chapter XX; Chapter XX).

(1) **Rationalization**: The bases of the rules that are to govern the new world society lie in the underlying laws of nature and rationality. Thus, the sciences and especially social sciences experience their extraordinary expansion throughout the period (Chapter XX; Drori et al. 2003, 2006; Frank and Gabler 2006). They are thought to arise to deal with functional problems, and may play some role in this. But they are involved even with the ongoing reconstruction and development of the cosmology for the new order (Frank and Meyer 2007; Drori and Meyer 2006). Global social integration and legal order are, thus, possible because humans act in a universe of common natural laws and social rationalities (Chapter XX). This makes possible, for instance, a scientized global environment movement (Chapter XX).

(2) **Ontology**: The underlying entities of the global social world, entitled to its protection and empowered to manage it, are human individuals (Thomas et al. 1987; Berger et al. 1974; Chapters XX and XX). They may operate through rational organizations, which derive from their choices. Or from national states, which similarly derive from their choices and are to respect their needs. Older notions not rooted directly in individual human rights and powers are delegitimated: nationalist models of corporate states, or bureaucratic or professional models of a Church (or university, or hospital, or business). The individual human, in principle, chooses a church, university, occupation, or even spouse (Chapter XX).

The overall outcome of global cultural re-rooting of all of society away from collectives like the state onto the human individual has been an expansive transformation in the social identity of this individual (Chapter XX). The widest range of kinds of people (indigenous people, children, handicapped people, and so on) are
now accorded global rights as human individuals. The rights have been enormously expanded over time. And their character has changed: from being entitled to autonomy and protection, they are now empowered. They are seen as having the rights and capacities to manage the entire world, economically, socially, religiously, and politically.

These dominating cultural achievements of the post-War period clearly generate globally standardized models of the organization of society (Chapter XXX, XXX). We can note two dramatic dimensions of these. Both of them are core devices for integrating the two dominating elements noted above – the rationalization and scientization of the natural and social environments, and the fundamental ontological standing of the individual.

(3) A Schooled World: First, there is the universal, extraordinary and extreme expansion of education (especially higher education) in population coverage, content coverage, and penetrative pedagogy. The expanded rationalized laws of nature and society are melded onto the minds and bodies of the empowered and entitled young to an astonishing degree (Chapter XX; Meyer et al. 1992; Schofer and Meyer 2005). And the whole enterprise has a strongly globalized and standardized flavor around the world (Chapter XX).

(4) An Organized World: Second, there is the equally universal and extreme expansion of society as a collection of highly participatory formal organizations, with every sector of social life (including economy and state) coming to be organized in this fashion (Chapter XX; Drori et al., eds., 2006). The organizations involved are hyper-rationalized, and also highly incorporative of the participatory individual. All sorts of alternative structures – traditional bureaucracies, traditional professions, property- and land-owning forms, and families in all their corporate forms – decline relative to the organized society.

Institutional theory is well adapted to both the description and the explanation of all these changes. In contrast, realist models (stressing the power of dominant states and economic organizations) have the greatest difficulty explaining why there are universities in New Guinea, thousands of formal organizations
in Uganda, scientific establishments in the Congo, efforts at accounting transparency in Honduras, and symbolically-recognized empowered individuals (with, e.g., gay and lesbian rights) everywhere.

Institutional theory can explain why the world generated so many models of proper actorhood during the period, why these models incorporated the elements they do (e.g., the modern individual), why the models have so much impact on putatively-autonomous national states everywhere, and why explosions of science and the rationalities, organizations and education, and human rights and powers, occur.

The continuing expansion of the world society on economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions through the whole post-War period, has generated constant socio-cultural movements along the dimensions noted above. The professions and non-governmental associations, of course, continually expand. Then there is the rationalization of nature and society. The sciences expand, and new ones are created, and it becomes important to contemplate the question of ice on a moon of Jupiter. The social sciences expand even faster, and everything from childrearing to the diet of prehistoric man comes under their scrutiny. Similarly, there is a continuous expansion in the perceived rights and powers of individual persons: women, gay and lesbian rights, indigenous people’s rights, the universal human entitlement to health and education and cultural choice, and powers of the young vis-à-vis their parents, their religious and military leaders, and even (tragically) their professors. And in consequence, education expands without a break, so that now about a fifth of a cohort of young people, worldwide, is enrolled in a university (Schofer and Meyer 2005). In parallel, rational organizations expand everywhere too, and global policing tracks their transparency and rationality on worldwide scales of degrees of corruption.

Stabilization and equilibrium would stop these dramatic changes, and would probably also partly undercut the institutional theories that best analyze them. By the logic of these theories, under stable conditions institutionalization works by locating cultural and social material in the proper motives and choices of constructed social actors. So after a period of time, the modern institutional system constructs a drama of realist actorhood. This tendency is analyzed in the work of researchers who study the rise of equal employment requirements for organizations (e.g., Dobbin et al. 1993, 1998; Edelman et al. 1992, 1999).
These reflect great social and legal movements, but after institutionalization any ordinary organizational leader can, with the greatest assurance, explain why it is entirely rational for him to hire able women, minorities, and so on – and indeed, to have a program to do so more effectively. Order and realism are thus constructed and supported. Successful institutionalization has reconstructed actors so that they can give the properly motivated accounts of their proper activities. And when they do so, conventional realist social research can properly report these accounts as empirical findings and explanations.

A serious institutionalist would certainly find such accounts misleading, and would suppose the whole depicted realist world in fact rests on broadly institutionalized cultural models, but this idea would recede into the intellectual background of social thought, not the foreground of the business school. So it is well known that a factory in which everyone simply follows the rules will not work (rule-following is a classic oppositional union strategy) – participants have to believe in the enterprise to make it work. And it is well known that most social structures rely heavily on cultural credibility, not just organizational power: this understanding fuels the contemporary social psychological (and economic) emphasis on the importance of something called “trust” for the effective operation of modern social structures, and techniques are proposed to support such trust as a psychological property of individual persons. This is a deflection from the central idea that modern rationalized society depends very heavily on institutionalized models.

**III. The Core Arguments of Institutional Theory**

In giving an account of the rise, nature and impact of the global society of the past half-century or more, institutional theory employs a very few very general ideas. These can be summarized simply, and they have proved to be quite convincing. Most of them, however, are strongly contested from realist perspectives, though as noted above there need not be any scientific conflict between lines of thought all of which can be true. These lines of thought often make different predictions, but that is a problem for substantive empirical research, not dogmatic resolutions. The real problem is rather a normative one, reflecting a need to stay on the right side of the red line: realist individualism is a reigning ideology of the modern system, and alternatives are seen as undercutting its legitimacy, or as improper and cynical
depictions of actorhood in a cultural system resting on great respect for the competence and capacity of actors. So there is a good deal of tension about institutional propositions that in fact have obvious validity.

1. Argument 1: The Rise of World Models: Modern world society develops a great many models about what human actors – individuals, organizations, and national states – should be like. Far over and above the effects of political and economic powers and interests, these models are developed and elaborated by professions and associations organized around the collective good – and sometimes by established actors operating under collective good claims.

Clearly, there is no way to explain the great social changes of the post-War period that we have outlined above, starting with a realist picture emphasizing the great powerful states and corporations. These did not produce waves of human rights expansion (gay and lesbian rights; a worldwide right to education), nor did they generate global scientization, and social scientization. Nor did they generate huge worldwide waves of educational expansion, or organizational rationalization. All these social changes are better seen as products of scriptwriters – “others” – than as products of interested actors.

But these observations generate much intellectual tension. Realists, who tend to recognize a social world made up only of interested actor, have great difficulty analyzing all these “others.” And because the issues are matters of normative tension, rhetoric becomes elaborate: there are defenses of a putative “old institutionalism” that properly recognized the role of power in rule-building (Hirsch and Lounsbury 1997; Stinchcombe 1997). One resolution is to imagine that the professionals, who generate much of the new and expanded cultural material, are doing so as self-interested projects, and manage to hoodwink all sorts of ordinary participants. But this is a weak account of the expanded professional authority of the modern system: it presents professionals as rational actors, but the rest of humanity as rubes.

A valiant attempt to see modern institutional rules as the product of hard-line social interests and functional requirements, with professionals serving mainly simply as mediators, is Stinchcombe’s recent criticism of institutional theory (2001; see also 1997). He successfully finds examples that fit his realist arguments.
For instance, rules in the construction business have to fit some very real constraints. But Stinchcombe does not attempt explanation of worldwide movements for gay and lesbian rights, or for education, scientization, and corruption control in the furthest peripheries of the world.

Note that a strong implication of Argument 1 is that the global models that arise in the modern system are models of the nation-state and other preferred actors as very nice and well-behaved, and thus as able in principle to get along well with each other. This follows from the Tocquevillian efforts of the professionals and the global associations to imagine and create a peaceful world order without a world state. The models do not stress the old evolutionary virtues of actors that successfully destroy each other.

2. Argument 2: The Impact of Global Models on Actors: Global models greatly impact the structures of the actors in world society – the national states, organizations, and individual identities involved (Chapter XX). This assertion, the original and surprising core idea of institutional theory, is now very widely accepted. It is empirically obvious that the great changes we have discussed have taken place on a worldwide basis, and enter into the structures and policies of essentially every society in the world. No place now escapes education, rational organization, science, social science, and the at least symbolic recognition of the rights and powers of the expanded human individual.

The assertion is obviously true and powerful, but realists have much difficulty with any conception of social actors as highly constructed and penetrated, so there is much tension about the point. The realist demands explanation of why “actors” in the world incorporate the global models – and demands explanation assuming the boundedness and priority and rational self-interestedness of these actors. So instrumental motives must be invoked. Typically, the realist idea is that national societies incorporate world models because “the World Bank makes them do it,” or “powerful states make them do it.” These arguments completely fail empirically much of the time – it is difficult to say the Americans make a third world country sign treaties the Americans themselves do not sign. And empirically, countries dependent on
the World Bank adopt fashionable policies at rates no different than autonomous countries. But the argument helps the realist maintain ideological realism.

One can see an expression of the tensions involved in the elaborate efforts of Mizruchi and Fein (1999) to understand the extraordinary popularity of the work of DiMaggio and Powell (1983). They adopt the posture of sociologists of science to investigate the question (a strategy often involved in special pleading in the social sciences). They discover that the key popularity of the work is in the red-line-crossing idea of “mimetic isomorphism,” or taking-for-granted copying of established models. They see this idea as a marginal part of the original work, and thus its popularity as an odd distortion in the history of the science. Thus, the popularity of the work reflects from a kind of unfairness: the authors crossed the red line. Oddly enough, a related theme appears in the apology noted earlier by DiMaggio himself (1988; see also Scott 2006). Even more oddly, Mizruchi himself later came to employ the notion of mimetic isomorphism (Mizruchi et al. 2006).

For a sociological institutionalist, there is no problem in explaining the adoption of external models by actors (Chapter XX). First, the expanded modern actor is built on external models in the first place, and readily adapts to their development. This is enhanced by the close supportive linkages between actors and the environments in which they are so deeply embedded. And it is enhanced by the routine incorporation by actors of the relevant professionals involved, who act as receptor sites for world models (Frank et al. 2000). Thus, Kogut and Macpherson show that countries with Chicago economists at their policy centers adopt preferred economic forms faster (2004) – presumably such economists were able to pick up the neoliberal themes coming down from Professor Sachs at Harvard more quickly.

Second, the “others” of world society constantly elaborate the models so that adoption is facilitated, providing constantly intensifying guidance on how to do the correct things. It becomes increasingly clear just how to do education, or health, or organizational reform.
The origins of the models around which modern actors form in the wider world environment help explain why the dominant adopted models in the post-War period have emphasized actorhood that is deeply virtuous in terms of the global collective good. Good nation-states are cooperative participants in global society. Good organizations are rational, transparent, and law-abiding. Good individuals are expanded, schooled, and empowered participants in the world.

**Argument 3: Models are Decoupled from Each Other, from Internal Structure, and from Activity:** External models flow into the structures of actors in highly decoupled ways. Policies and structures tend to be poorly linked to each other, and often poorly linked to internal subunits and to practices. This is true on an individual case by case basis even when at the systemic level there is a good deal of overall coherence.

The decoupling idea has the most massive empirical support in studies of individual actors as in. the famous gaps between norms and behavior. It is a central finding in the study of organizations, as with the dramatic inconsistencies between formal and informal organization (Dalton 1959) and the studied inconsistencies and disjunctions between policy and practice (Brunsson 1985, 1989). It is a routine observation in studies of nation-states, with their strikingly low case-level associations between formal policies and actual practices (e.g., Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005; Cole 2005). And it is well-theorized in institutionalist reasoning (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Chapter XX). First, global models are elaborated as ideals to solve global problems of legitimation, not only to be useful in practice. Second, these models routinely reflect ideals beyond what is practicable in the most resourceful countries, let along impoverished peripheries. Thus, third, most actors do not have the capacity to conform to the best proprieties. Fourth, historic path dependencies and local interests may make conformity to standard models subject to some resistance. Finally, the adoption of exogenous models can create dialectic reactions. For instance, it is well understood that the long-term global emphasis on the importance and powers of individuals (e.g., democracy) creates some incentives to edit who the relevant individuals are, and thus has sometimes created impulses to genocide.
In fact, from an institutionalist point of view, decoupling is a necessary and stable feature of large-scale universalistic social organization (Brunsson 1989). And to maintain visions of universalistic rationality, modern actors devote enormous efforts at chronic reform activities (e.g., Brunsson and Olsen, eds. 1993). And when the reforms fail, they employ a very wide range of mechanisms to sustain hope for future reform (Brunsson 2006).

Realists have the greatest difficulty with the decoupling idea. They imagine that social structural rules arise because powerful political and economic actors want them in place, and want them implemented. If this doesn’t happen, someone is cheating, or someone is asleep, and in any case great long-run stresses must be resolved. Permanent decoupling, as in the routine great inconsistencies between American criminal law and American criminal practice, is a problem for most realists. One can see the extreme tension, for instance, in an attack on a precursor of institutionalist thinking – the famously imagistic paper by Cohen, March and Olsen called “A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice” (1972) – by Bendor et al. (2001) thirty years after the original paper was published. The original paper had some creative imagery about decoupling at its core, and was widely cited for this: it also had some illustrative simulation models that were given little subsequent attention. Unable to effectively attack the core imagery, Bendor et al. devote extraordinary effort to destroy the simulation models, clearly attempting to undercut the whole subsequent institutionalist development (2001: 189): “We believe it is possible to revitalize the [theory]. . .this operation would deprive the [theory] and the March-Olsen variant of the new institutionalism of a certain mystique. Without this bold move, however, there is little chance that these ideas will shed much enduring light on institutions.” Crocodile tears lie thick on the page of the American Political Science Review.

Argument 4: Global Models Impact Internal Structure and Activity Independent of Their Adoption: Global institutional changes have pervasive effects, operating as waves running through the world (and through nominal actors in the world) rather than through point-by-point transmission through networks and organizational structures.
The point here is an obvious one about the world. An enormous amount of planned change doesn’t get effectively organizationally implemented, given the extreme decouplings of the modern system. But an enormous amount of change happens anyway, impacting actors that have adopted corrected policies and actors that haven’t done so. The inflated character of the modern actor means that internal components and behaviors are under systemic control more than under local actor control. The modern actor, constructed from the wider environment and maintained by linkages to that environment, has many internal components under environmental control. Being a properly modern rational actor, given inflated definitions, is possible only through a great deal of conformity, and by having many structural components (e.g., decisions) supported by the environment.

Thus Ramirez and his colleagues (e.g., Bradley and Ramirez 1996) study the impact of world norms on rapidly expanding female enrollments in higher education. They naturally observe pro-female policy changes in countries through the whole post-War period (perhaps greater in countries more closely tied to the world society). At the country level, such policy changes seem to have no direct effect at all: that is, countries with pro-female-education policies do not have more rapidly expanding female enrollment.

Worldwide, female enrollments dramatically increase, but they increase in both adopters and non-adopters of virtuous policy. Exactly the same pattern appears in Abu Sharkh’s (2002) cross-national study of child labor. Countries (especially well linked-in ones) ratify International Labor Organization principles against child labor, but doing so has no effect on practices. But child labor declines sharply everywhere (especially in well-linked countries). Related findings characterize research on human rights (Cole 2005; Hathaway 2002; Hafner Burton and Tsutsui 2005). And similar results characterize studies of worldwide changes in demographic transitions (Bongaarts and Watkins 1996).

The key idea here is that modern social actors are highly expanded and highly constructed: their components reflect exogenous principles and forces rather than right functional relations. So change in the wider environment can flow in and around actors in wave-like patterns, only very partially affected by tight network and organizational relationships.
This Durkheimian point about the embeddedness of social actors in diffuse collective cultural environments has powerful implications for the study of large-scale and long-run social change in the current world society. We turn to a discussion of this point, and the presentation of one final argument in the discussion of world society from the point of view of institutional theory.

IV. World Society, Institutional Theory, and Large-Scale Social Change

A striking feature of modern, highly developed, social science has been its inability to predict, or even analyze after the fact, a great deal of worldwide social change. It is precisely in the areas to which the institutional theory of world society most directly attends that the failure is most extreme.

Thus the world has experienced a dramatic and exponential expansion of all sorts of inter- and non-governmental organizational structure, without pause, through the whole post-War period (Boli and Thomas 1999; Drori et al. 2006). The expansion cuts across topic areas and regions of world society and involves organizations that penetrate far down into the world-s societies, so that local persons and groups are dramatically more likely to be linked in than in the past. But one can study the social scientific literature on organizations theory and get no real hint of this dramatic change, and even long after the established fact get no real explanation.

Exactly the same sort of thing has gone on with the global expansion of the widest range of professions and professionals. Expansion goes on everywhere, and linking into world society. Lawyers and judges, supposedly prisoners of national boundaries, cite international precedents with abandon. Medical communication is worldwide, and so is managerialism. The social work people talk about global social policies, and routinely communication cross-nationally, in a way that was very implausible a few decades ago (Chapter XX). The widest range of academic professionals is linked in to worldwide communication and citation patterns. Overall, the professionals are now a dominant category in the global occupational
structure. But the social sciences – having no real explanation – continue to reason as if we were in the older world of workers and farmers and capitalists and owners. And nation-states. The problem, essentially, is the limited social scientific awareness that modern participants are acting in relation to a world society. When a supranational society is theorized, it is mainly seen as a production and exchange economy. But that conception cannot provide explanations of most of the crucial global expansions, which arise from a richly developed imagined world society (Anderson 1983).

The impact of all this machinery on the astonishing expansions and globalizations of science and social science is dramatic (Frank and Gabler 2006). And so is the impact on the extraordinary career of human rights, which expands its domain in the most dramatic ways to cover new groups, new rights, and details down to the local ground of social life (Chapter XX; Berkovitch 1999; Boyle 2002; Frank and McEneaney 1999; Ramirez et al. 1998; Soysal 1994; Tsutsui and Wotipka 2004). The social scientific analyses of these changes, and of the processes by which they occur, is impoverished. Social scientific thought can comprehend, for instance, a Saudi Arabia that sharply restricts the public roles of women. It cannot readily comprehend a Saudi Arabia with extraordinarily expanded female educational enrollments all the way through the university level (Bradley and Ramirez 1995).

Finally, the domestic consequences of all this – worldwide expansions in education and intra-societal formal organization, penetrating every society – have been extreme. But it is most difficult to find serious social scientific attempts, even unsuccessful ones, to try to explain rapid educational expansion in Malawi, and intensive organization-building in the Republic of Georgia (both countries without the supposedly necessary economic infrastructures).

The Durkheimian vision embodied in Argument 4 above can help explain both the problem and the solution here. Obviously, social scientific reasoning, especially in the American context, has stayed on the ideologically proper or realist side of the red line discussed above. Actors are taken very seriously as bounded, autonomous, prior, and purposive. So explanations of how and why they might change are restricted to realist mechanisms – organizational and network processes that bring new information and
incentives into fixed structures. Thus, a leading social scientist might explain the unpredicted women’s movement with demographic arguments (Stinchcombe 1968) about expanded education, lowered birth rates, and efficient domestic machinery. Or, shifting to a demand side, the scientist might imagine changed work force needs requiring women. None of this makes all that much sense in explaining such a broad social change running through the whole population, and none of it explains a women’s movement in Thailand.

Argument 4 works much better. Changed post-War global ideologies about human rights apply everywhere, can easily be developed to cover many different populations (certainly including women), and are available to the widest array of intra-societal groups everywhere. Women can pick up the new story, or school teachers, or lawyers and legislators, or young female students. And all these people can adopt the new story in their thinking, their activities, or in very partial versions of each. If we assume that each actor in world society – individuals, organizations, or national states – is a composite of decoupled components, each exposed to and indeed dependent on the exogenous cultural environment, explanations for the diffusion of all sorts of broad ideological constructions are easy to generate and test. We can quickly understand the expansion of female educational enrollments in the most unlikely fields and countries (as per Bradley and Ramirez 1996, or Wotipka and Ramirez 2001).

The key idea is that as persons and groups and societies in the modern system become legitimated as “actors,” they become very open systems (Meyer and Jepperson 2000), highly exposed to and embedded in their environments on many dimensions and through many pathways. Dependencies on wider cultural and organizational environments are built in at every point. So even if an organizational manager forgets to adapt to a changed principle – say, a favorable attitudes towards the employment of gay people – many internal participants will independently understand the new rule. And because the organization will probably have expanded its actorhood by employing many schooled professionals paid and trained to be attuned to the wider environment, the flow of the appropriate cultural material into the organization will probably be quite rapid.
The same points can be made about the modern nation-states, as expanded and empowered but by the same
token deeply embedded actors (Chapter XX; McNeely 1995). Their internal participants – increasing
numbers of whom are highly professionalized and thus tied through schooling to the wider world order –
rapidly bring in the culture of the wider system. And the same points can be made about the modern
schooled individual, who quickly picks up the new social forms independent of internal preferences or of
habituated activities.

Thus, the processes we have discussed above give an account of how the modern system turns people and
groups and societies into organized and empowered and expanded actors. Plausible theories of an
integrated but stateless system call for models of expanded actorhood. Classes of professional and
associational model-producers quickly arise and expand, and the appropriate models of actorhood are
produced. They diffuse throughout the world, as people and groups and societies find empowered
actorhood an attractive prospect. Much decoupling and inconsistency results, but expanded actors are in
the same way open systems, so the new cultural materials flow in anyway.

All these processes produce the strange world we now observe. It is a world with the most inflated claims
about the rights and powers of human persons, the obligations and competencies of formal organizations in
every sector of social life, and the extraordinary powers and responsibilities of national states. For all these
structures, inflation produces expectations and standards far beyond any possible tightly coupled reality.

So no nation-state is really capable of being and doing what a nation-state now should be and do. All are
failed states by the expanded modern criteria. Similarly, no organization can competently do all the things
a modern organization should do according to expanded actorhood standards. And no individual is
remotely competent do exercise all the powers and responsibilities a modern individual has: by now, all
political, economic, social and cultural outcomes are thought to be determined by, and in principle the
responsibilities of, individual human persons seen as actors. Individual identities are enormously
expanded and proliferated (Chapter XX).
High aspirations and high self-esteem are everywhere, and have the highest legitimacy. Compared to them, reality looks mostly like failure. By expanded current standards, essentially all the actors in the world require the most extensive therapies. This produces the contemporary astounding demand for therapists – the professionals and organizations and helpful actors that created the expanded demand in the first place.

**Argument 5: Expanded Modern Actorhood Creates Expanded Professionalism and Consultancy:**

Worldwide, we can observe the most dramatic increases in the sorts of professional occupations that provide advice and therapy to actors on the widest range of dimensions. Every sector of social life generates expanded professional consultants. This is obviously true for individuals, with huge and growing populations of consultants providing help: medical, psychological, educational, legal, economic, recreational, spiritual, and so on.

In the same way, organizations seem to need ever-expanding arrays of consulting help. Some of this can be internalized, with the incorporation of the relevant professionals. But much of it occurs in a globally-expanding market of consultants and consulting organizations. The consultants involved tend to cover most of the same domains dealt with by the therapists of the modern individual, suggesting the extent to which modern actorhood of every sort has many elements in common (Chapter XX; Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson, eds. 2006; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, eds. 2002; Drori et al., eds. 2006).

And national states turn out to need advice and instruction on the widest variety of issues, so a great and growing set of international organizations and professionals arises to provide the appropriate services (McNeely 1995; Finnemore 1993; Chapter XX).

**Conflicts:** The world social system we have described is built on visions of highly responsible participatory actors cooperating in a orderly global society. But in a number of ways, it can and does generate and intensify conflicts.
(1) By and large, the professionals and associations generating models for global society, and consultantship and therapies within this society, do so in ways that envision little conflict. These groups are rooted in the universalisms of science, social science, legal rights, education, rational organization, and so on. But of course many other participants in world society have their own visions of the global collective good, and produce more conflictful or less universalistic models of this good. So with expanding integration, and expanding actorhood, all sorts of religious, national, and ethnic leadership arises and mobilizes the expanding actors in directions that create conflicts. Economists do jihad for global progress, and sociologists for global equality, but other model-builders and advisors fill the same role with other forms of jihad.

(2) Models of expanding actorhood have built-in inconsistencies. First, there are the obvious inconsistencies between the expanded individual actor and the expanded organizational and nation-state actors. The individual is increasingly entitled to a self-chosen culture, and the organization to integrated cooperation.

Second, there are the legitimated inconsistencies between actors at each level. Individuals with expanded rights tread on each other’s toes (in part generating the exceptional violence of American society, for example). Organizations are dramatically interpenetrated, with endless inconsistencies between, for example, professional and organizational obligations. Similarly, expanded national states have expanded possibilities for conflict with each other.

Third, there are the dramatic inconsistencies between actor powers and rights, on the one hand, and practical realities, on the other. The world society celebrates the equality of individuals and nations, but is extraordinarily unequal in fact – and with expanded integration, these inequalities increasingly come to be seen as inequities. The world’s models of national societies emphasize possibilities for progress and internal equality that are unrealizable, and increasingly seen as unjust. Everywhere, there are the legitimate perceptions of world society, national societies, organizational life, and individual life as involving failure. A world of high self-regard is a world with many possibilities for failure and the
perception of failure and injustice. Thus, the modern system is filled with well-constructed legitimation crises, though not of the sort Habermas (1975) may have had in mind. The crises involved provide much fuel for mobilization, and for the expansion of markets for consulting and the mobilization of helpful professional and associational “others.”

All these kinds of inconsistency provide fuel for social mobilization, and often conflict. And the mobilizations and conflicts involved often have high world-recognized legitimacy, permitting much mobilization, great ideological formulations, and massive collective action.

In a well-known treatise, Mancur Olson (1965) noted the extreme difficulty with which systems of self-interested rational actors and actions could generate collective action. He noted that this problem might not exist with other forms of action – for example, religious actors and their activities. Since we obviously live in a world that has generated extraordinary levels of collective action, it may be fair to infer that our nominally-secular social modern world is a highly religious one.

V. Modernity as a Quasi-Religious System

The social sciences have tended to take a micro-social and realist stance toward modern society. They have in recent decades brought “back in” actors. Individuals as actors, nation-states as actors, and all sorts of organizations as actors. The imagery about collective live is aggregative – social forces work by affecting and constraining these (often individual) actors, who then scheme, employing power to achieve their interests (Coleman 1986; see Jepperson and Meyer 2007 for an analysis). Society is an aggregated product of their struggles. Much of the thinking involved works from economic metaphors, as if modern people are competing for something to eat in a scarce environment. And indeed, the field of economics has gained a great deal of centrality: within political science and sociology, modified economic ways of thinking (e.g. “economic sociology”) have also gained some prominence.
Central to all this thinking is a picture of the social world as made up of interested actors in some sort of organized or network relation to each other. The term “organizational field” is popular, as is the term “opportunity structure.” The implication is indeed that the actors have strong interests and pursue them. The actors and their interests are prior, though in more sociological versions some network relationships and constraints on these may also be seen as exogenous – so the actors are very real actors, but are constrained (or sometimes empowered) by their embeddedness in organized social relations.

This scheme is applied very broadly. So, for example, the whole occupational structure is seen in light of economic metaphors – as a great labor market, in which people produce products which they then can exchange for other products (adding up to a Gross National Product). This is very strange, since in modern societies relatively few people engage in anything that might traditionally be defined as work or labor. And their jobs are often more organized around credentials than markets. And for most of them there is no very clear product, and certainly no clear exchange of products in any traditionally economic sense of “products.”. In modern societies, for instance, the most common jobs are positions like schoolteacher. Or manager. Indeed, most jobs lie entirely outside any sector with clear and tight links to a productive economy. They are in medicine, or education, or religion, or recreation, or the civil service, or the military, and both concepts and measures of “productivity” tend to be very opaque: very often operationalization consists simply of the tautological principle that if someone gets paid, they must have done something productive. From a traditional economic point of view, modern society is a ball game played without a ball: or with an elaborate set of sociocultural definitions substituting for a ball. The roles and identities of the participants, similarly, cannot be seen as dominated by exogenous and prior actorhood if the interests and purposes of these participants are centrally socioculturally constructed.

So at the least, it is useful to set up models which start at the other end of things – with the socioculturally constructing “others” rather than the “actors” that are their products, and with the rationalized and scientized environment (or ball game) within which they interact. This was the spirit of the renowned “garbage can model” discussed above (Cohen et al. 1972), and is very much the spirit of the sociological institutionalism which followed it. More broadly, it is the spirit of almost any phenomenological sociology
or cultural anthropology, identifying the cultural worlds that inhabitants are acting within. A key idea of sociological institutionalism, is that modern cultural worlds identify these inhabitants as “actors.”

If we do start with the cultural constructions, we immediately observe that they work, not by defining seamless webs of cultural authority, as in the good old days of the oldest institutionalism. They work by defining “actors” at the front and center of the social stage. And they defined these actors as having interests and goals and relationships. These relationships occur in a very highly rationalized context, involving the scientized analyses of nature and very detailed models of organized social structure: extraordinary levels of differentiation isolate special sectors of social life, so actors can have goals difficult to think of in an earlier world (stamp collecting, skiing, possessing a house with ten thousand square feet, achieving recognition for eating hot dogs).

How is integration to be achieved in this constructed world? Clearly, money – rooted originally in economic imagery – plays a core role as a generalized medium of value (Jepperson and Meyer 2007; see Zelizer 1994 for instances of the fragmentation of this medium). Most of it is received for activities of little known significance for traditionally conceived economic activity (teaching, for instance, or doing economic or sociological research). And most of it is spent for things of little significance in traditional productive economy terms. But it does permit a rough sociocultural translation of activity and meaning around the world: one can fairly definitively relate violin playing in Mongolia to grave robbing in Rome through the medium. Neither of these activities has economic meaning in any traditional sense. But being able to relate them so tightly to each other maintains a reality in which standardized human social actors, behaving in a standardized and rationalized world, enter into a common conceptualized or imagined polity. The logic here is deeper than economistic reasoning: fundamental human “actors” have many utilities in common, and these can be well indexed by a standard criterion of value. Thus more than a medium of economic exchange, money in the modern world society becomes an index of shared value and values.

All this has a highly constructed ceremonial quality. This, presumably, is an essential element of an integrated but stateless world polity.
VI. Conclusions

Institutional theory provides something of a systemic picture describing and explaining some important features of the modern world society. It is a picture at dramatic odds with realist emphases on a world economy and power structure, and accounts for many things that realist notions cannot well explain (or simply ignore).

The institutionalist vision stresses the world as, in good part, a culturally imagined community, with elements that parallel religious visions. Cultural leaders from the schooled professions, and public good associations incorporating their ideas, rise to play prominent roles. The analogues with religious leaders from other integrated but decentralized systems are direct (e.g., 19th century America; many periods in medieval Europe). And of course, participants who are interested actors in the world rise above their interests to enter the higher world of the collective good: Nations like the United States or Sweden support grand disinterested visions of the world order, much like the kings (who were religious as well as secular leaders) of the medieval world.

Beyond this, more traditionally religious elites also mobilize to make increasingly global claims. They try to reconstruct explicitly spiritual commonalities and unifying principles for a world society. And they try to put forward claims for the global recognition of spaces and themes. These efforts have been successful at mobilizing subgroups within world society, and conflicts among them (as in Islamic efforts to extend their claims to the larger world), but have been surprisingly unsuccessful in generating explicitly religious world themes on a global collective level. The contrast with the normative successes of elites rooted in more secular traditions – the supporters of scientific and rationalistic norms, and legal principles of human rights – is notable. Even the new “traditions” of a global order, such as World Heritage Sites, tend to be supported with more rationalistic discourses.
All the main elites support religious-like visions of a world of modern virtuous actors, saved by schooling and organizational reform to be valid participants in a transformed global community. Models of policy and identity arise -- adoption will lead to universal progress and universal equality and justice. These models stress, not the need for participants in the world to abase themselves before a dominating organizational structure, but the empowerment and entitlement of the participants themselves as somewhat sacralized and legitimated “actors.”

Naturally, the actors themselves find such models attractive, and adoption is very common. Individual self-regard rises around the world, and former peasantries come to hold and express opinions, and to mobilize. Groups turn into organizations, with purposes and policies and programs: they take on strategies for effective action. And national states greatly expand their powers and responsibilities – they now assume primary responsibility for national progress and justice.

But whether or not particular entities take on their full roles as actors, with the rights and powers involved, the same cultural standards are likely to penetrate them anyway. Expanded actors in the modern system are highly decoupled open systems, subject to pervasive cultural flows.

In any event, the expanded and rather religious actorhood that spreads around the world vastly transcends the realistic capabilities of the participating actors. It creates a greatly expanded set of persons and groups at the top of the world stratification system who are not exactly actors in the ordinary social scientific sense. They are “others,” schooled in university knowledge of natural and rational law, and in their understanding of the rights and obligations of actors. They have much in common with religious functionaries everywhere. They make their living telling actors what to do, analyzing the failures of actors, and creating expanded new models of what actors should be like.

The outcome, obviously, is a world of rapid integration, much conflict, and very high levels of collective action. The integration, conflict, and collective action occur around models that are sometimes explicitly
religious but more often secular dramas of science, rationality, and legal rights. Whether or not they are explicitly religious, they clearly have an ultimately religious or transcendental character.
References


