
Norms, culture, and world politics: insights from sociology's institutionalism

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W. Richard Scott, John W. Meyer, and Associates, eds. 1994. *Institutional Environment and Organizations: Structural Complexity and Individualism*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.

George M. Thomas, John W. Meyer, Francisco O. Ramirez, and John Boli, eds. 1987. *Institutional Structure: Constituting State, Society, and the Individual*. Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications.

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International relations scholars have become increasingly interested in norms of behavior, intersubjective understandings, culture, identity, and other social features of political life. However, our investigations largely have been carried out in disciplinary isolation. We tend to treat our arguments that these things “matter” as discoveries and research into social phenomena as forays into uncharted territory. However, scholars within the fields of international law, history, anthropology, and sociology have always known that social realities influence behavior, and each field has incorporated these social constructions in different ways into research programs.

Sociologists working in organization theory have developed a particularly powerful set of arguments about the roles of norms and culture in international life that pose direct challenges to realist and liberal theories in political science. Their arguments locate causal force in an expanding and deepening Western world culture that emphasizes Weberian rationality as the means to both

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justice, defined as equality, and progress, defined as wealth accumulation. These world cultural rules constitute actors—including states, organizations, and individuals—and define legitimate or desirable goals for them to pursue. World cultural norms also produce organizational and behavioral similarities across the globe that are not easily explained by traditional paradigms in political science. Because they call these cultural norms and rules “institutions,” the approach has been named “institutionalist” by those working within it.

This essay provides an overview of sociology’s institutionalism and explores its implications for the study of world politics. At the outset it should be noted that sociologists use the term “institution” in very different ways than do rational-choice scholars or historical institutionalists, emphasizing the social and cognitive features of institutions rather than structural and constraining features. Incommensurable definitions mean that despite similarities in labeling, these approaches—all called institutionalist—have little in common. In fact, rational-choice scholars working on positive theories of institutions or the new institutional economics are not institutionalists at all in the sociological sense (and vice versa).¹

Sociology’s institutionalism should interest international relations (IR) scholars in political science for several reasons. First, it challenges dominant paradigms in political science directly. It provides a system-level theoretic framework with which to analyze international politics and generates testable hypotheses about international behavior that compete with those of realism and liberalism. These hypotheses predict similarities in behavior caused by common global culture, where realism or liberalism would expect differences in behavior by differently situated actors with different interests. The fact that institutionalists explore their hypotheses with data-intensive quantitative methods not usually associated with work on norms and culture in IR but much admired by skeptics of cultural arguments intensifies the institutionalists’ challenge. Explanatory claims made by realists and liberals must address institutionalist alternatives if they are to be persuasive.

Second, institutionalist arguments speak directly to a number of theoretical approaches being developed outside the confines of the neorealist–neoliberal debate that has dominated U.S. IR scholarship. Institutionalism concerns about the expansion of Western world culture are shared by English school scholars investigating the expansion of the West and the nature of what they have termed international society.² Institutionalists’ arguments also lead them to investigate globalizing phenomena and the growing power of individuals in ways that invite comparison with the work of James Rosenau, Michael Zürn,

1. Jepperson 1991 provides an excellent discussion of the sociological understanding of institutions and institutionalism. For comparisons of the various institutionalisms, see DiMaggio and Powell 1991; and Hall and Taylor 1994.

2. See Bull 1977; Bull and Watson 1984; Gong 1984; and Buzan 1993.

Ernst Otto Czempiel, and Philip Cerny.³ Both the English school and globalization scholars may quarrel with the way institutionalists treat these phenomena. English school scholars may be uncomfortable with the sweeping power and determinism of the sociologists' arguments. Those interested in the process of globalization and individuation may be put off by the institutionalists' claim that this process happens in conjunction with, rather than at the expense of, increasing state authority. But in both cases these differences can and should be settled empirically through coordinated research.

Third, while it shares some features of constructivist arguments in political science, sociology's institutionalism provides a much richer and more detailed theoretical framework than has constructivism. Sociologists specify the substantive content of social structure. They do more than simply argue that social structure matters; they tell us what the social structure *is*. Institutionalists' specification of world culture (the social structure) as having particular Western and Weberian components has yielded hypotheses that can be tested empirically; indeed, they already have been tested in the large and growing institutionalist research program.

Further, the institutionalists' specification of social structure is global and all-encompassing. It permeates all aspects of political and social life in all states. Political science research on norms and culture has tended to be structured around specific issue-areas and therefore argues that particular norms matter in particular issue-areas. Constructivists have not made an integrated argument about how the various norms in different areas fit together. This lack may be a legacy of regimes scholarship, which provided the theoretical framework for much early research on norms, since regimes were issue-specific by definition.⁴ Without such an argument about the content of a systemic social structure, constructivism cannot provide an alternative to systemic theories. The sociologists claim to have done this. As I will discuss below, constructivists in political science have reason to be concerned about their claims—not because they are being outflanked, but because the sociological specification and research program marginalize politics.

Fourth, sociology's institutionalism incorporates and endogenizes historical changes rather than abstracting from them. The focus of most realist and liberal IR scholars is on developing generalized principles of interaction that apply regardless of time and place. Their emphasis is on the ways in which, for example, Thucydides' politics are like those of Metternich, which are in turn like those of Henry Kissinger. The emphasis is on what is the same over time, not what is different. Historical change creates anomalies in these analyses; it is not part of them. Institutionalists are interested in developing generalizations about historical change. They emphasize the ways in which states' goals and behavior and even their very natures are deeply shaped by prevalent political

3. See Rosenau 1990; Zürn 1995; Rosenau and Czempiel 1992; and Cerny 1995.

4. Krasner 1983, 1.

ideas and social norms of a given time in history. Further, they offer an argument, albeit a sketchy one, about the dynamics of this change.

Finally, institutionalist arguments about global culture bear directly on recent policy debates. Rather than a “clash of civilizations” emerging as the fundamental dynamic of future world politics, institutionalist research provides powerful evidence of global cultural homogenization.⁵ Scholars may quarrel about how to operationalize civilization and culture—indeed, they are already doing so—but institutionalists have both an argument and evidence to contribute to this debate. They are less clear, however, about what cultural homogenization implies for global order and stability. I return to this issue below.

The first section of this article provides a brief overview of institutionalist arguments and their research program. To clarify the nature and implications of these arguments, I contrast them with others better known to American political scientists. While sociology’s institutionalism has structural similarities to Immanuel Wallerstein’s approach and shares substantive interests with the English school, it is fundamentally different from both and from other arguments political scientists have encountered.⁶

The second half of this article explores the implications of the sociological approach for political science research. Sociology’s institutionalism allows us to ask questions about features of international politics that are assumed away by other paradigms. However, some of the answers it provides are not likely to satisfy political scientists. The article closes with some recommendations about ways in which political scientists can engage and challenge the sociological approach that might benefit both disciplines.

Overview of sociology’s institutionalism

Culture and organizations

Institutionalist arguments date from the mid-1970s when a group at Stanford University interested in cross-national analyses of political and economic change began to explore the relationship between formal organizational structures and culture.⁷ Prevailing theories about bureaucracies and organizations held that, indeed, culture had little impact on those entities. In fact, formal bureaucratic organizations comprised the antithesis of culture; they were technical, rational, and therefore culture-neutral. They transcended culture.

5. See Huntington 1993; Ajami 1993; Bartley 1993; Binyan 1993; Kirkpatrick, Weeks, and Piel 1993; and Mahbubani 1993.

6. See Wallerstein 1974a; 1974b; and 1980.

7. For a good discussion of the intellectual roots of institutional analysis see DiMaggio and Powell 1991.

The Stanford group challenged that view. Prevailing theories explained the rise, form, and spread of formal bureaucratic organizations in functional terms. Following Max Weber, the conventional wisdom held that rationalized bureaucratic structures were the most efficient and effective way to coordinate the complex relations involved in modern technical work. Expanding markets and technological changes create increasingly complex management tasks. Bureaucratic organizational forms must also then expand to coordinate these activities across more and more aspects of society. Bureaucratic organization was seen as the only way to divide labor, specify responsibilities, and institutionalize coordination and decision making in rational and efficient ways.

The problem with this view was that bureaucratic organizations have spread even more quickly than the markets and technology that were thought to have created the need for them. Cross-national analyses of political and economic change, especially in the developing world, made it abundantly clear that the world was being bureaucratized and organized much faster than it was being developed economically or technologically.⁸ Further, the link between formal organizational structure—the blueprint for how the bureaucracy is supposed to function—and the organization's day-to-day activities was often very loose. Organization theorists had recognized this earlier, but cross-national analyses—especially those dealing with developing countries—underscored the point. If bureaucracies do not act according to their rationalized formal structures, then the efficiency of rational formal structure cannot be the reason for their proliferation.

The alternative explanation developed by Meyer and his colleagues emphasized the environment of these organizations. Formal bureaucratic structures did not spread as a result of their functional virtues as efficient coordinators of complex relationships (they may or may not be so) but because the wider environment supports and legitimizes rational bureaucracy as a social good. Organizations exist, proliferate, and have the form they do not because they are efficient but because they are externally legitimated.⁹

This is the entry point for culture. The content of this external environment is cultural. The social values that support and legitimate some organizational forms and not others, some social activities and not others, are cultural values. Culture had gotten a bad name in sociology for many of the same reasons it got a bad name in political science. Part of the institutionalists' self-described mission is to reclaim culture for macrosociology.¹⁰ One way they do this is to make dominant Western culture the object of their study and thus to denaturalize features of social life that appear natural and inevitable to most of

8. The studies in Meyer and Hannan 1979 point to this conclusion.

9. The seminal essay outlining this argument is Meyer and Rowan 1977. Early applications of the argument in cross-national contexts can be found in Meyer and Hannan 1979.

10. Thomas et al. 1987, 7.

us because this is our own culture. We are so deeply embedded in it that it is hard to see beyond it.

Western-style rationality is not an unproblematic attribute of bureaucratic organizations, as most organization theorists assume. Rationality is a cultural value. It is associated with modernity and progress and other cultural “goods” of contemporary social life. Ironically, people create rational bureaucratic organizations for other than rational reasons. When faced with social work to be done, people form a committee or create a bureaucracy because it is the appropriate socially sanctioned way to address a social task; it is “the thing to do.” We continue to form committees and bureaucracies even when we are skeptical about their effectiveness, indeed, even as we deride them as ineffective and useless in public and political discourse.¹¹ There is an almost ceremonial aspect to bureaucratic organization in modern life. Bureaucratic rationality is “myth” and conformance with it is “ceremony” in the institutionalist view.¹²

Since John Meyer and Brian Rowan’s articulation of the basic argument—that external cultural legitimation rather than task demands or functional needs explains much if not most of organizational behavior—institutional analyses have followed different paths empirically. The institutionalist argument is not necessarily international in nature, and much of the work and subsequent theorizing have been done by scholars looking at national and even very localized phenomena.¹³ Institutionalists have mapped normative and cultural environments that shape the behavior of organizations in professions such as mental health, in the arts and culture, in municipal governments, in national governments, and in the creation of whole business sectors.¹⁴ However, Meyer and his colleagues have continued their interest in cross-national and global phenomena. In fact, the logic of the argument that cultural environments operate on organizations at all levels suggests that local environments are always embedded in larger national or transnational ones. Thus, if one were to push institutionalist scholars investigating localized organizational behavior to specify the origins or dynamics of their local environments, they would have to look ultimately to global phenomena of the kind Meyer and his colleagues investigate. In this substantive sense, the global institutionalist arguments form a backdrop for the others and logically subsume them. It is this international-level argument that challenges IR scholars in political science most directly and is the focus of this essay.

11. For an exploration of this paradox in the context of efforts to reform U.S. governmental bureaucracy over the past century, see March and Olsen 1989, especially chap. 5.

12. Meyer and Rowan 1977 emphasize this in their title.

13. Among those who have been particularly influential are authors contributing to Powell and DiMaggio 1991. Other influential works include Scott 1981; Meyer and Scott 1983; and Scott et al. 1994.

14. See Meyer 1994; DiMaggio 1988; McNeely 1993; Tolbert and Zucker 1983; Dobbin 1994; Suchman 1994; and Dobbin 1992.

The content and consequences of the world cultural environment

The world culture that institutionalists see expanding across and integrating the globe is a Western culture. Although institutionalist literature contains no single extended discussion of either the origins or the content of global culture, the following picture emerges from several sources often cited by institutionalist researchers.¹⁵ It has its origins in Western Christendom and Western capitalism and has spread as the West has expanded economically and politically. In doing so it has bureaucratized, marketized, and individuated the world in ways that are not expected or easily explained by other social science arguments. In fact, Meyer argues that the expansive nature of its ideologies and culture is itself a distinctive feature of Western culture with roots in medieval Christendom. Theories or ideologies like those from the West that make claims about all people and all places have much more expansive potential than particularized and localized ideational frameworks like that of the Balinese theater-state documented by Clifford Geertz.¹⁶

As noted earlier, one central feature of Western culture is the value it places on rationality and purposive action. By rationality, institutionalists mean simply the structuring of action in terms of ends and means. Rational action, in Western cultural terms, is not only good, it is natural. However, one does not have to read very far in anthropology, history, or area-studies literatures before discovering that Western-style purposive rationality is not so obvious or natural to non-Westerners (or, indeed, to Westerners, though they would be loath to admit it). There are many other ways to structure social action, notably in terms of roles, rituals, duties, and obligations, that are not consequentialist in a Western rational way but are effective guides to social behavior nonetheless.¹⁷

Progress and justice are the two ends toward which Western societies structure their rational action. Through historical experience these two goals have come to be defined in particular ways. Progress or "success" is defined materially, which for individuals usually means increasing wealth and for states means increasing gross national product. Justice is usually defined in terms of equality. Rational means to both these goals, in the Western cultural framework, are bureaucracies and markets. Claims of efficiency in contributing to increased wealth and progress legitimize both. Both locate authority in impersonal rules that can be legitimated in terms of equality—equal access, equal opportunity.

The Western cultural agenda of promoting expanding gross national product and equality through expanding and deepening bureaucracies and markets has

15. The best treatments are in Thomas et al. 1987 and Bergesen 1980.

16. See, respectively, Meyer, Boli, and Thomas 1987, 30; and Geertz 1980.

17. For a discussion of alternative logics of action that support the institutionalist view, see March and Olsen 1989, chap. 2.

spread to dominate global political and social life over the past several centuries. One prominent artifact of Western cultural dominance is the organization of the world into Western-style bureaucratic states. Conventional arguments about the rise of the modern state emphasize its functional advantages at providing security and extracting revenue to explain its success at the expense of other forms of political organization.¹⁸ This may (or may not) be true of the rise of the state in Europe, but it does not explain the expansion of Western-style states to all corners of the world. The modern bureaucratic state has become the sole legitimate form of political organization in the world; virtually all others have been eliminated. Empires, colonies, feudal arrangements, and a variety of other forms have become extinct and, perhaps more important, unimaginable in contemporary politics.¹⁹

This is not a functional result for at least two reasons. Extreme valuation on statehood as the only legitimate form of political organization makes many kinds of political conflict difficult to resolve. It means that self-determination requires having a state. If you are not a state, you are nobody in world politics, and national liberation groups understand this. This creates an all-or-nothing dynamic in many conflicts that might be more easily resolved if other organizational forms were available.

Second, this valuation on statehood has created many ineffective, even failed, states. Far from having emerged as “lean, mean competitors” from some organizational selection process, the state as an organizational form has had to be imposed and, indeed, propped up in many parts of the world. The fact that hopelessly failed states still must be reconstructed as states rather than reorganized in some other way, for example as colonies, underscores the strong cultural support for statehood and the illegitimacy of other political forms.²⁰

Drawing on their argument about Western culture legitimating bureaucratic structures, institutionalists explain these seemingly dysfunctional outcomes as the result of external cultural legitimation rather than internal task demands. States exist in many places not because they are good at what they are supposed to do (provide security and economic growth, promote equality) but because a larger world culture supports them.

The other central feature of Western culture with important political consequences is individualism and expanding notions of individual rights of all sorts—human rights, citizen rights, women’s rights, children’s rights. Meyer makes a powerful case that Western cultural values have created the individual as an autonomous actor and describes the processes whereby attributes of individual personhood have become elaborated and expanded.²¹ There is

18. See Tilly 1975; and Skocpol 1979. For another, more recent argument that emphasizes military coercion and exchange dominance, see Spruyt 1994.

19. For a more detailed argument, see Meyer 1980. For extensive empirical research on this phenomenon, see Strang 1991; 1990.

20. For a related, albeit noninstitutional, argument on this point see Jackson 1990.

21. Meyer 1987.

nothing inevitable or obvious about structuring societies around atomized individuals. Many other societies and cultures locate social value and moral responsibility in the family, the tribe, or some other social unit. Western individualism is distinctive, and its cultural logic leads to some distinctive behavior patterns. Substantively, it leads to the expansion of individual legal rights, noted earlier. Analytically, it leads Western social science to treat individuals as unproblematic, irreducible, autonomous actors who know what they want independent of social or cultural context and, indeed, who create the social context. The institutionalist claim is the opposite—that the individual as autonomous social actor is a product, not a producer, of society and culture.

Sociology's institutionalism is thus radically different from realism or liberalism in IR in that it falls on the structural or holist side of the agent–structure debate.²² Analytically, social structure is ontologically prior to and generative of agents. It creates actors; it is not created by them. In contrast, most arguments in IR and political science begin with agents. They take as given some set of actors having a similarly pre-specified set of interests—states pursuing wealth or security, members of Congress pursuing reelection, firms pursuing profits, national leaders pursuing a place in history. Macro-level social structure is explained as the consequence of their interaction. Even in approaches that IR calls “structural,” like Kenneth Waltz's structural realism, the international structure is an epiphenomenon of the power capabilities of and interaction among individual actors; it has no independent ontological status. It constrains only; it is not generative.²³

In institutionalist analysis, the social structure is ontologically primary. It is the starting point for analysis. Its rules and values create all the actors we might consider relevant in international politics, including states, firms, organizations, and even individuals. The structure of this argument is thus like Wallerstein's, but the content is quite different. Wallerstein's structure is a material and economic one; it is capitalist production imperatives that create the states, multinational firms, transnational organizations, national liberation movements, and class struggles that we see driving contemporary international politics.²⁴ The institutionalists' structure is a cultural one; it is Western rationality and individualism that create states, markets, bureaucratic organizations, and, they would argue, capitalism itself.

Institutionalists' substantive concerns with the expansion of Western culture most resemble English school concerns. Contributors to Hedley Bull and Adam Watson's volume, *The Expansion of International Society*, investigate many phenomena of interest to institutionalists. Like institutionalists, they see Western culture expanding to become a world culture with important global political implications. However the two groups carry out their investigations in

22. See Wendt 1987; and Dessler 1989.

23. Waltz 1979.

24. Wallerstein 1974a. For a detailed analysis of the structural character of Wallerstein's argument, see Wendt 1987.

quite different ways. English school investigators carry out their work more like historians; they arrive at carefully crafted narratives that interpret events. They do not engage in the explicit hypothesis-testing exercises that American social scientists admire.²⁵

Institutionalists, by contrast, operate very much in the American social scientific tradition. Their theorizing and hypotheses are explicit, and their methods are positivistic and often quantitatively sophisticated, much more so than most IR research. This allows them to engage and challenge those who would dismiss arguments about culture based on more interpretive research methods.

The institutionalist research program

The intellectual structure of the institutionalist research program flows from the basic Meyer and Rowan insight and the structure-oriented (as opposed to agent-oriented) nature of their argument. Realists, liberals, and others who begin with assumptions about actors and interests would expect different actors with different interests to behave differently. Similar behavior by dissimilar actors or actors with dissimilar interests would be anomalous. But within an institutionalist perspective, such behavior is easily explained. Global cultural norms may make similar behavioral claims on dissimilar actors. Of course, in a structural realist perspective the international system may constrain dissimilar actors into similar behaviors, but such constraints should not apply uniformly. Stronger actors will be less constrained and, as structural realists are quick to point out, power constraints often still leave many options for states. A structure of power constraints cannot explain the wide scope and uniformity of isomorphic outcomes the institutionalists document.

Institutionalists use this insight to investigate and explain isomorphism of social forms across very different areas of the world in a wide variety of substantive areas. Isomorphism across states, a topic of obvious interest to IR and comparativist scholars in political science, has been investigated by institutionalists along two research trajectories. First, institutionalists have posed a question that IR scholars cannot because of their ontological assumption that states are actors: *why* do we live in a world of states? As noted earlier, states are not always or obviously functional or effective providers of security, economic growth, and equality rights in many parts of the world. Yet, as David Strang has demonstrated, sovereign states are a remarkably robust organizational form that has edged out all competitors. Given the weakness of many less-developed states, this result can only be understood, institutionalists have argued, as the result of strong external cultural support for the state in the larger world environment.²⁶

25. Bull and Watson, 1984.

26. See Strang 1991; Meyer 1980; Boli 1987b; Ramirez and Thomas 1987; and McNeely 1989.

A second and more central question addressed by the institutionalist research agenda is isomorphism across states: why do states in such radically different circumstances look so much alike? Some amount of similarity might be expected by conventional perspectives focused on common task demands faced by all states. They all need money, so they all have finance ministries. They all need coercive apparatuses to collect money from their populations, so they all have police. They all need to control and/or provide services for internal populations, so all have home or interior ministries. But isomorphism is pervasive to degrees that are hard to explain from the point of view of local task demands.

For example, national constitutions define citizen rights and obligations in ways that correlate not with local conditions in the various states but with the kinds of ideologies and rights articulated in other national constitutions written at that time. John Boli's work shows that constitutional articulations of citizen rights have changed in a coordinated way across the international system of states over the past century. The pattern of rights expansion he documents suggests that whether or not a state codifies suffrage for women or economic rights for citizens has little to do with the status of women or economic conditions in a state, but it has a great deal to do with international cultural norms about women's suffrage and economic rights at the time the constitution was written.²⁷

Similarly, Yasemin Soysal's work on guest workers in European states shows how the concept of citizenship itself is embedded in global human rights norms that give rise to a pattern of policies among these states that is puzzling from realist or liberal perspectives. All European states invited guest workers in to meet short-term labor shortfalls. When unemployment began to rise, however, it became politically impossible for any of these states to send workers home. Moreover, European states have all provided food, housing, medical care, education, and other benefits to these foreign nationals they no longer want. Soysal traces this behavior to global human rights norms that constrain states' treatment of foreign nationals across the system.²⁸

Education policy has not concerned IR scholars, but as an arena in which states create citizens, it is the point at which the relationship between the two foci of Western modernity—the state and the individual—is defined. Consequently, it has received a great deal of attention from institutionalists, and it is in this research that many important features of the institutionalist argument have been developed.

State-sponsored education has grown enormously in the past fifty years, and curricula around the world show striking similarities. Institutionalists point out that the reasons why education should be state-directed and -formalized are not obvious; certainly, no one can point to a reason for the sudden explosion in

27. Boli 1987a.

28. Soysal 1995.

world education activity after World War II. The rush to schooling is a relatively recent historical phenomenon. Further, the content of what is taught (or what is supposed to be taught) around the world has converged dramatically. Again, looking at task demands one can think of good reasons why education curricula in a state whose economy produces primary commodities should be quite different from one that produces high-technology manufactures, but the similarity in formal education structures does not reflect this. These similarities, institutionalists argue, result from global changes in world norms and culture about education.

Individual national education systems are structured by a common “ideological order,” institutionalists argue. As Francisco Ramirez and John Boli write,

[T]his order contains a powerful dialectic: One pole is the ideology of the state as the primary locus of social organization and vehicle of societal development; the other is the ideology of the individual as the basic unit of social action, the ultimate source of value, and the locus of social meaning. These poles are integrated within the ideology of citizenship, in which the individual is seen as both a contributor to the national development project (as a producer and as a loyal supporter of state programs, laws, and regulations) and as a beneficiary of state organizational action (as a consumer and as a “citizen” in the pure sense who enjoys certain protections and guarantees underwritten by the state).

This dialectic has clear implications for the meaning and structure of education in the world system. The ideology of the individual rests in part on a functionalist theory that new members of society (children) are essentially unformed beings requiring comprehensive initiation and socialization. Education is the means to achieve this end.²⁹

“Ideologies” or shared cultural and normative understandings about what a state is and what an individual is thus structure education (and a myriad of other features of modern social life) in common ways across the globe.

Welfare politics and welfare policies also change in patterns that correlate not with national levels of industrialization, unemployment, or labor unrest but with broader international redefinitions of state responsibility vis-à-vis citizens. David Strang and Patricia Chang have shown the importance of international organizations to the elaboration and dissemination of these global definitions of responsibility; George Thomas and Pat Lauderdale extend these findings to land reform issues.³⁰

Even the state defense apparatus, the component of the state that realism would expect to be most constrained by task demands imposed by a self-help world, exhibits this kind of isomorphism. First, virtually all states have defense

29. Ramirez and Boli 1987a, 154. For additional institutionalist research on education, see Meyer, Ramirez, and Soysal 1992; Meyer 1977; Ramirez and Robinson 1979; Ramirez and Boli 1987a; 1987b; and Ramirez and Meyer 1980.

30. See Strang and Chang 1993; and Thomas and Lauderdale 1987, respectively.

ministries even when they face no external threat. Further, virtually all states have tripartite military structures, with an army, air force, and navy—even landlocked states. Finally, weapons acquisition patterns, particularly among developing states, is often driven by symbolic (and therefore cultural) considerations. Dana Eyre and Mark Suchman argue that many of these states treat weapons like flags and acquire amounts and assortments of weapons that make little sense from the point of view of deployment for defense but that have a lot of “symbolic throw-weight.” These behaviors are difficult to understand from within an analytic framework that assumes that military structures are determined by the demands of defending territory against outside threats. They make a lot of sense, however, if one understands having a military with particular characteristics as being a necessary part of the trappings of modern statehood. Understanding that militaries have a strong cultural and legitimating role to play for states, vis-à-vis both other states and their own populations, explains a great deal of what would otherwise be anomalous behavior.³¹

As these examples suggest, institutionalists’ empirical interests are wide-ranging. The common thread in all of this work is an interest in the ways in which international behavior correlates with and is driven by systemic or global cultural factors rather than local task demands. Each demonstration poses a challenge to conventional actor–interest approaches including realism and liberalism in political science.

Implications for political science

One of the chief virtues of sociology’s institutionalism is that it provides a framework with which we can ask questions about issues that realism and liberalism treat as assumptions and thereby remove from the research agenda. Institutional research on the origin and nature of states and sovereignty is one example. The broadening and deepening of the European Union, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the growth of multilateralism have put sovereignty and statehood high on the agenda of many IR scholars.³² Neorealism and neoliberalism are of little help in addressing these questions since these approaches begin with the assumption that states are actors having certain prespecified and unproblematic characteristics. While assumptions of this kind have advantages (parsimony, generalizability) they come at the price of removing the assumed features of politics from the research agenda. Sociology’s institutionalism, by contrast, offers a set of empirically testable propositions about states and sovereignty that can guide research. Political

31. See Eyre and Suchman forthcoming; and Suchman and Eyre 1992. For a related constructivist analysis, see Wendt and Barnett 1993.

32. For examples, see Jackson 1990; Thomson 1994; Weber 1995; Lyons and Mastanduno 1995; and Thomson 1995.

scientists may test these arguments and find them wanting, but they would at least have theoretical guidance for such tests.³³

Human rights, especially the rapid expansion of successful human rights claims, is another area about which conventional IR approaches have little to offer in the way of hypotheses or testable explanations. Approaches that treat states as actors have little to say about individuals and provide no reason to expect that individuals would be able to make claims against states that in any way compromise state sovereignty or control over citizens. Institutionalists, by contrast, make clear claims about how and why individual rights will spread and have extensive empirical evidence to back up their claims.³⁴

Rosenau's turbulence theory also emphasizes individuals, and it might provide a way to challenge institutionalists. His argument that individuals are able to make new and expanding claims against states because of a revolution in cognitive skills associated with technology suggests a different pattern of the spread of these rights and claims than the one institutionalists would expect: Rosenau would expect rights expansion to correlate with technological diffusion, while institutionalists would expect roughly contemporaneous global change, regardless of objective technological conditions.³⁵

In addition to shedding light on issues that are assumed rather than investigated by our dominant paradigms, institutionalism also has implications for issues that have been central to neorealist and neoliberal debates. For example, institutionalists would have strong arguments to make about multilateralism and the role of international institutions—a cornerstone of the neorealist–neoliberal debate. Institutionalists would expect continued aggregate growth in the number and influence of international organizations but not for the reasons neoliberals claim. Multilateralism will increase not only because it facilitates Pareto-optimal outcomes and helps states get what they want in cost-effective ways but also for cultural reasons. Participation in the growing network of international organizations is culturally necessary and “appropriate,” in James March and Johan Olsen's sense of the term.³⁶ Further, participation in international organizations constructs or constitutes what states want or, in the case of European Union participation, what they are.³⁷ Institutional arguments about multilateralism would focus on what Ruggie calls the “qualitative dimension” of multilateralism—the norms, principles, and shared social understandings that it embodies—but they offer a much more detailed notion about where those principles come from and their relation, one to another, than political scientists have so far articulated.³⁸ The empirical

33. For an explicit rejection of institutionalist arguments about sovereignty in favor of what I would call a “neo-Machiavellian” view, see Krasner 1994.

34. See, for example, Thomas et al. 1987, chaps. 6, 10, 11, and 12.

35. Rosenau 1990.

36. March and Olsen 1989.

37. See Soysal 1995; and Finnemore forthcoming.

38. Ruggie 1993, 6.

expectations stemming from this argument would be for continuing and even increasing adherence to multilateralism—even when it runs contrary to expressed national interests—because it embodies some set of values central to the larger world culture.

However, at least two features of sociology's institutionalism should concern political scientists. First, institutionalist research has been more concerned with documenting the effects of world cultural structure than investigating its causes or the mechanisms of change in the cultural structure itself. Institutionalists tend to produce global correlative studies whose structure and logic follow from Meyer and Rowan's initial insights about isomorphism in the face of dissimilar task demands. Institutional studies generally proceed by collecting quantitative data on a large number of units (usually states) and demonstrating that rather than correlating with local task demands, attributes or behavior of the units correlate with attributes or behavior of other units or with worldwide phenomena (international conferences and treaties or world historical events, for example). These analyses are often quite sophisticated, using event history analysis and other techniques that look exotic to most political scientists. However, once correlation is established, world cultural causes are assumed. Detailed process-tracing and case study analysis to validate and elaborate the inferences based on correlation are missing.³⁹ Research to uncover the processes and mechanisms whereby world cultural norms spread and evolve would have at least two effects. The first would be to enrich the institutionalist argument. Such research would open up a more truly dialectical relationship between agency and structure and enable more persuasive accounts of the origins and dynamics of the world cultural structure.

Detailed case studies about the mechanisms by which cultural norms evolve and spread are also likely to call into question the cognitive basis of institutionalist theory. Institutionalists ground their arguments about the ways in which culture operates in social psychology. Meyer credits Erving Goffman, Guy Swanson, and C. Wright Mills with providing a connection between this social psychological literature and institutions.⁴⁰ Detailed examination of cases of spreading Western culture is likely to reveal that its triumph is not due only or even primarily to cognition. The picture painted by institutionalist studies is one in which world culture marches effortlessly and facelessly across the globe. Little attention is paid either to contestation or coercion. To any political scientist (or historian) an account of the rise of the modern state in the West and its expansion across Africa, Asia, and the Americas that omits conflict, violence, and leadership is grossly incomplete. Similarly, the implication that human rights or citizen rights or even market economies become established and spread in a peaceful, orderly fashion through cognition alone is untenable to anyone who has detailed knowledge of cases.

39. For some examples of studies that address this gap, see Thomas and Boli forthcoming.

40. See Goffman 1959; 1974; Swanson 1971; and Mills 1940.

The lack of case study analysis or on-the-ground investigation of the mechanisms whereby world culture produces isomorphism obscures the roles of politics and power in world history and normative change. The cognitive processes to which institutionalists point are important, but they are by no means the only processes at work in international life. Destroying cultural competitors, both figuratively and literally, is a time-honored way of establishing cultural dominance. Treatment of the native populations in North America is one example. Attempts at ethnic cleansing in Nazi Germany, Bosnia, Rwanda, and elsewhere are another. Cultural rules are often established not by persuasion or cognitive processes of institutionalization but by force and fiat. Over time, cultural norms established by force indeed may become institutionalized in the sense that they come to have a “taken-for-granted” quality that shapes action in the ways institutionalists describe. But emphasizing the institutionalized quality of sovereignty, for example, and its effects in world politics should not obscure the role played by force and coercion in imposing sovereignty rules and in arbitering their ongoing evolution.

One instance where force and military power may be particularly important to institutionalist concerns involves the Reformation and eventual Protestant domination of the West. Institutionalists trace their Western cultural norms back to medieval Christendom without a word about the Reformation or Protestantism’s effect on these cultural rules. This is a startling omission given the intellectual debt these scholars owe Max Weber. Many of the cultural rules institutionalists emphasize—individualism and markets, for example—arguably have strong ties to Protestantism specifically, not Christianity generally. One could argue that the Western culture that is expanding across the globe is really a Protestant culture. Protestantism did not come to dominate Europe through cognition and persuasion alone, as centuries of religious wars make clear. Western culture may look the ways it does because of three centuries of Anglo-American (i.e., Protestant) power and domination of the West, domination that was secured through repeated military conquest of France.

The second feature of institutionalist research that should concern political scientists is their specification of the content of world culture. Institutionalists focus on Western rationality as the means to both progress and equality. Progress is defined as wealth accumulation, justice is defined as equality, and rational means, in institutionalist research, are usually bureaucracies and markets. Institutionalists tend to treat these elements of Western modernity as at least loosely compatible. Equality, in the form of individual rights, expands together with markets and bureaucracies across the globe, and institutionalist research documents the collective and interrelated spread of these cultural norms.

The implication, which will be suspect to all political scientists, is that all “good” things (in the Western cultural frame) can and do go together. Institutionalists may not intend this implication, but both their research and

their theorizing consistently underscore the mutually reinforcing nature of these Western cultural rules.

In fact, there are good reasons to believe that the elements of world culture, even as the institutionalists have specified it, contain deep tensions and contradictions that constrain isomorphism and limit the stability of behavioral convergence. Most obvious is the tension between the two “ends” of Western world culture—progress, defined as economic accumulation, and justice, defined as equality. The trade-off between equity and growth in development economics is well-known. In making decisions about economic policies, the two pillars of the normative structure often pull in opposite directions. Partisans of redistributionist policies have invoked equality norms in their defense. Those pushing for more and faster growth will evoke progress norms. Policymakers often have to make explicit and controversial trade-offs between the two.

Similarly, the two rational means to justice and progress—markets and bureaucracies—may be in tension. Market arrangements may be justified normatively by their efficient contributions to progress (wealth accumulation) and by equality defined as opportunity or access, but they often create outcomes that offend other definitions of equality, notably equality of outcomes. Markets tend to produce unequal distributional outcomes. The common solution is to bring in bureaucracy, in the form of the state, to remedy the equality offenses of markets. However bureaucracies may compromise the efficiency of markets and so compromise progress. Again, progress (wealth) conflicts with justice (equality). And, again, no obvious or equilibrium set of arrangements can resolve this.⁴¹

Contradictions among dominant cultural norms mean that social institutions are continually being contested, albeit to varying degrees at different times. Unresolved normative tensions in a set of social compromises at one time may be the mobilizing basis for attacks on that set of social arrangements later as people articulate normative claims that earlier were pushed aside. Further, compromises among competing world normative principles may be contingent on local circumstances and personalities and are likely to reflect local norms and customs with which international norms have had to compromise. Thus, after World War II Japan was forced (note the process was not cognitive) to accept a set of Western economic and political arrangements that had been forged elsewhere, in the United States. Over time, those arrangements became institutionalized in Japan but in unique ways that reflected non-Western local cultural norms. The subsequent success of Japan in Western terms (a great deal of economic accumulation with relative equality) has prompted Western firms and Asian states to adopt a number of Japanese practices, policies, and norms. This kind of cultural feedback, from periphery to core, is neglected by the unidirectional institutionalist model.

41. For an expanded discussion of this set of tensions, see Finnemore forthcoming, chap. 5.

These contestation processes for normative dominance are political. In fact, normative contestation is in large part what politics is all about; it is about competing values and understandings of what is good, desirable, and appropriate in our collective communal life. Debates about civil rights, affirmative action, social safety nets, regulation and deregulation, and the appropriate degree of government intrusion into the lives of citizens are all debates precisely because there is no clear stable normative solution. Further, they are all debates involving conflict among the basic normative goods identified by the institutionalists. Civil rights, affirmative action, and to some extent social safety nets are debates about the nature of equality—who attains equality and how that equality is measured. Since the solutions all involve bureaucratic intervention, these debates are also about the relationship of bureaucracies and the state to equality. Debates about social safety nets raise specific issues about the relationship between bureaucracies and markets and the degree to which the latter may be compromised by the former in the service of equality. Debates over regulation and government intrusion are both about the degree to which bureaucracy can compromise markets, on the one hand, or equality and individual rights that derive from equality, on the other.

If one takes seriously the tensions and contradictions among elements of culture, research must focus on politics and process. If cultural elements stand in paradoxical relations such that equilibrium arrangements are limited or constrained, the interesting questions become, which arrangements are adopted where—and why? Institutionalists may be right. Common global norms may create similar structures and push both people and states toward similar behavior at given times, but if the body of international norms is not completely congruent, then those isomorphisms will not be stable. Further, people may adopt similar organizational forms but show little similarity in behavior beyond that. Botswana and the United States may both be organized in the form of a modern state, but the content of those forms and the behavior within them are very different. Isomorphism is not homogeneity; it does not create identical behavioral outcomes.⁴² Without a specification of culture that attends to oppositions within the overall structure, institutionalists will not be able to account for either diversity or change in that structure.

Conclusions

Institutionalist arguments emphasize structure at the expense of agency. Doing so has important intellectual benefits. It allows institutionalists to ask questions about features of social and political life that other perspectives take for granted—ubiquitous sovereign statehood and expanding claims by individuals, for example. Further, from an IR theory perspective, institutionalists' emphasis

42. I am grateful to Michael Barnett for bringing this point to my attention.

on structure allows for system-level explanations that compete with other dominant paradigms and so enrich the body of theory available to tackle puzzles in the field.

If the neglect of agency were only an omission, there would be little cause for concern. No theory explains everything. One can always explain a few more data points by adding a few more variables and increasing the complexity of the model. But the institutionalists' inattention to agency leads them into more serious errors. It leads them to misspecify both the mechanisms by which social structure produces change and the content of the social structure itself.

Cognitive processes may dominate organizational change in many empirical domains, but they compete with and often are eclipsed by coercion in many of the empirical domains that concern IR scholars. Educational curricula may change in peaceful ways driven by cognitive decision-making processes; state authority structures often do not. Violence is a fundamentally different mechanism of change than cognition. Both mechanisms may operate in a given situation. Often there are choices to be made even within the constraints imposed by force, but outcomes imposed externally through violence are not captured by a cognitive theoretical framework.

Institutionalists are not alone in this tendency to overlook power and coercion in explaining organizational outcomes. Much of organization theory shares this characteristic. Terry Moe has noted the failure of the new economics of organization to incorporate considerations of power, but even Moe, a political scientist, is not particularly concerned with issues of violence since these occur rarely in his own empirical domain—U.S. bureaucracy.⁴³

Institutionalist models imply a world social structure made up of norms that are largely congruent. Their emphasis is on the mutually reinforcing and expansive nature of these norms. They stress the consensus that arises around various cultural models—of citizenship, of statehood, of education, of individual rights—to the point that these norms and institutions are taken for granted in contemporary life. The implication is that the spread of world culture is relatively peaceful. Institutionalists specify no sources of instability, conflict, or opposition to the progressive expansion of world culture. Yasemin Soysal's work is perhaps the most attuned to contradictions among the cultural elements of citizenship she studies. However, even in her work these contradictions result only in paradoxical arrangements with which people seem to live reasonably peacefully.⁴⁴

The result of this specification is that all of politics becomes problematic in an institutionalist framework. If the world culture they specify is so powerful and congruent, the institutionalists have no grounds for explaining value conflicts or normative contestation—in other words, politics. A research design that attended to agency and the processes whereby isomorphic effects are

43. Moe 1984.

44. Soysal 1995.

produced would have prevented institutionalists from falling into this trap. Focusing more closely on process would draw attention to the contradictions among normative claims and force institutionalists to rethink both the specification of world culture and its likely effects.

These problematic features of institutionalist theory lie squarely on the turf of political scientists. Politics and process, coercion and violence, value conflict and normative contestation are our business. Institutionalism would benefit greatly from a dialogue with political scientists. Likewise, political scientists could learn a great deal from institutionalists. Thus far, IR scholars interested in norms have lacked a substantive systemic theory from which to hypothesize and carry out research. Institutionalism provides this. Taking its claims seriously may produce radical revisions to the existing sociologists' theories. It may also produce opposing theoretical arguments. Either outcome would advance research in both disciplines and enrich our understanding of world politics.

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