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World Society, Institutional Theories, and the Actor

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Key Words

rationalization, otherhood, agency, phenomenology

Abstract

Much modern social theory depicts society as made up of autonomous
and purposive individual and organized actors. In reaction, the new in-
stitutional theories build arguments about the wider social conditions
supporting stable systems of such agentic actors. Phenomenological ver-
sions, which are especially relevant to analyses of modern integrating but
stateless world society, treat actor identities as themselves constructed
in the wider and now global cultural context. These ideas call attention
to the modern collective construction of expansive models of actors, the
rapid diffusion and adoption of elaborated models of actor agency and
rights, the consequently decoupled character of actor identities and ac-
tivities in the modern system, and the extraordinary mobilizing potential
built into the elaborated models of individual and organizational actors
in world society and into the inconsistencies between these models and
activity.

INTRODUCTION

Sociological theory and dominant social ideologies, especially in the United States, tend to depict society as made up of, and constructed by, agentic, purposive, and bounded human actors. The individual, seen as such an actor, has become central. Organizations and states are now conceived as actors derived from their individual actor members. The contrast with earlier theories and ideologies that envisioned societies as built of extended families, or of social, ethnic, or ecological communities, is striking. For example, only a few decades ago, the study of rural and urban communities, seen as rather organic structures, was central in American sociology.

Reacting to models of society as built on human actorhood, attention is given to the institutions that maintain systems of actors. A variety of new institutionalisms address this question. Some take what I here call a realist form, assuming that actors and their purposes are prior to and autonomous from the limited institutional rules that constrain and empower them. Others are more phenomenological and suppose that expansive institutionalized systems construct the actors as well as their activities. These phenomenological (or constructivist) lines of thought have gained prominence in the rapidly expanding contemporary world society, since social control efforts in an interdependent but stateless world work to expand theories and ideologies about the powers and responsibilities of actors.

In this paper, I review new sociological institutionalisms and then consider the global social changes that make the more phenomenological versions especially relevant. This leads to a discussion of arguments and evidence on how modern world society generates institutionalized models of proper human actors, how these models are incorporated in individuals and organizations, how actor identities tend to be decoupled from practices, and how the resultant inconsistencies generate forces for rapid social change.

BACKGROUND

Sociological theories, since the Enlightenment, have tended to see human social life as embedded in institutions, or as exogenous patterns of meaning and organization (Jepperson 1991). Persons have been envisioned as creatures of habit, groups as embedded in customs, and societies as reflecting culture (e.g., Camic 1986). Analyses have taken the form of evolutionary or functional accounts of how these wider systems of meaning and structure changed over time in response to social and material developments. Motivated individual human behavior was certainly involved, as were purposive organizational structures such as classes and states, but the main emphasis was on the causal forces built into the institutionalized patterns and their embedded social entities. The lines of thought involved are now seen as among the old institutionalisms (Hirsch & Lounsbury 1997, Stinchcombe 1997). They retain much standing in anthropological analyses of nonmodern social arrangements and in historical analyses of premodern social life in societies that are now modernized, but they have increasingly been replaced in theories of modern society.

The post-Enlightenment models envisioned society as an institutional system, to be sure. But they also advanced the idea that this system could be rationally managed and used by human persons playing formerly divine institutional roles, and thus becoming legitimated and competent (i.e., agentic) actors in history rather than embedded participants. The newly liberated "men" could build history and society, rather than live at their mercy. In this vision, "man makes himself" (Homans 1964). Models differed on who the main actors in this new history might be. In centralized models, the state, along with the bureaucracies chartered by it, played the core role. In more liberal models, individuals and the organizations they produced were the main actors. In between, a variety of corporatist models developed (Jepperson 2002b).

Over time, actor-centered models took precedence over the old institutionalisms. As I note below, World War II and its aftermath provided a dramatic intensification of this change. On both theoretical and policy sides, individualist economics and psychologies gained prominence (Frank & Gabler 2006). And even sociological thinking shifted ground. For instance, Hwang (n.d.) shows that in the main American sociological journals, the term "actor"—formerly rare—became common in the 1960s and is found in over half the papers in recent decades. This linguistic shift bespeaks a changed image of the person, the group, or the nation-state. An actor, compared with the mundane person or group, is understood to have clearer boundaries, more articulated purposes, a more elaborate and rationalized technology, a more clearly defined set of resources, and a much stronger internal control system. An actor is thus much more agentic—more bounded, autonomous, coherent, purposive, and hardwired—than a person. So if the organization of earlier modern society rests on assumptions that its members have some mass education (Stinchcombe 1965), and are thus persons rather than peasants, the postwar world supposes its participants might have been to the university and are agentic actors rather than ordinary persons (Schofer & Meyer 2005). The key distinction here has to do with agency. The peasant should perhaps be treated humanely by the authorities, but is little entitled to make demands. The person-citizen of modernity has legitimate interests for benefits within the rules of the system, may influence elites, and may have legitimate agency to demand the correct benefits. The emergent actor presumably has authorized agency not only to represent self-interest, but also to choose interests and even actively to manage the rules of the social environment. This actor possesses legitimate collective authority and thus can and should take agentic responsibility for a highly collective life.

But theoretical and policy problems arise with models of society as simply an anarchy made up of purposive and autonomous actors. How is coordination to be achieved, and how are conflicts to be resolved? In a world of expanding interdependencies, all sorts of threats are visible—global military destruction, national class and ethnic conflicts, and local instability and disorder.

Thus, in response to the postwar rise in actor-centered theories of modern society, a renewed interest arose in the 1970s in defining the institutions required to create and stabilize systems of actors. The interest was dramatic at the world level, but it also developed in the analysis of organizations and organizational systems (Greenwood et al. 2008) and in the analysis of the role of the individual actor in modern society. These lines of thought make up the new institutionalisms. If the old institutionalisms are about exogenous patterns (e.g., cultures) in which persons, groups, and societies are embedded, the new institutionalisms are about patterns that constrain and empower very agentic, autonomous, bounded, and purposive actors. The new institutionalisms, thus, conceive of a tension between actors and institutions, often discussed as an opposition between agency and structure (Sewell 1992). There are many different versions of these conceptions (see reviews by Powell & DiMaggio 1991, Jepperson 2002a, Hasse & Krücken 2005, Senge & Hellmann 2005, Scott 2008b).

THE NEW INSTITUTIONALISMS

I array the new institutionalisms on a single continuum, from more realist to more phenomenological models. Several distinctions are collapsed in this simplified scheme (Jepperson 2002a has a more elaborate analysis). First, in realist models, the actors have boundaries and closely integrated internal structures independent of their participation in institutional orders: People are naturally actors. In phenomenological models, actor agency, boundaries, and internal structures are legitimated by the wider institutional system and vary with its variations. Second, in realist models, the imagined institutional environment tends to be very limited in character, made up of a very few rules. In phenomenological models, the institutional

environment is rich, made up of complex cultural meanings and organizational structures. Third, in realist models, the institutional environment operates as a clear set of organizationally binding rules, affecting actors at their boundaries. In phenomenological models, the institutional environment operates more as a cultural or meaning system, penetrating actors far beyond their boundaries and constructing agency, identity, and activity.

Few sociological models are found at the realist extreme. But in economics only one institutional rule—property rights—may be seen as needed to make a progressive society (North & Thomas 1973). And in political science, only sovereignty might be required (Krasner 1999). Moving away from extreme realism, many ideas in economics and political science suppose that richer institutional environments control actors on multiple dimensions. On the meaning side, the term "norm" is invoked (Katzenstein 1996), exemplified by prohibitions on chemical weapons. On the organizational side, functional coordination problems are solved by shared arrangements (e.g., for a postal system). At this point, realist sociological ideas enter the picture too. Organizationally, network arrangements constrain and empower their actor nodes and may generate stabilizing balances of power. Culturally, communities of actors arise around shared symbols and may moderate the operation of raw autonomous actors.

More explicit new institutionalist conceptions in sociology refer back to the well-known paper of DiMaggio & Powell (1983). Here, realist conceptions of the actor remain, but this actor is seen as socialized and constrained by a complex institutional environment. Structurally, the term "organizational field" is employed to capture this (the parallel notion in political science is "regime," as in Krasner 1983). And these fields have cultural content, too, as actors can be socialized by normative materials carried by the professions (in political science, "epistemic communities," as in Haas 1992).

But DiMaggio & Powell (1983) add to this mix yet another idea: that sometimes institutionalization goes so far that the actors simply comply with its requirements mimetically, without the full awareness or purposiveness that actorhood ordinarily implies. This line of thought—taking off from arguments in Meyer & Rowan (1977)—lies outside the models of realist sociologies. It has attracted continuing attention (Mizruchi & Fein 1999). The key ideas here are phenomenological (or social constructivist), make up much of the creative core of the new sociological institutionalism, and are sometimes seen as constitutive of it. For convenience, I adopt this language here, contrasting institutionalism (meaning the more phenomenological version) with all sorts of realist thinking.

In analyzing the individual and organizational participants in modern society, the phenomenological institutionalist models certainly employ the term "actor," just as realists do. But the meaning of the term differs greatly. In realist models, purposive and bounded and often rational actors are natural entities, in some respects prior to the social life under analysis. In phenomenological models, actors are constructed entities, playing parts as in the theater. So in realist models, the relation of actor and action is causal, with society and its structure as a product. In phenomenological models, the actor on the social stage is a scripted identity and enacts scripted action (Berger & Luckmann 1967). In such models, thus, the institutional system—the organizations and cultural meanings that write and rewrite the scripts—becomes central, and the actors are seen as partly derivative on a very rich institutional environment. And in these models, questions about what forces create and modify the casual institutional scripts also become central.

The Red Line

A few observations on the distinction between realist and phenomenological models of the actor are needed. First, for research purposes, there is no necessary conflict between these lines of thought. Sensible multivariate analyses should incorporate variables from across the spectrum laid out above: This is basic,

for instance, to the population ecology tradition, which fundamentally incorporates and theorizes both kinds of ideas (e.g., Hannan & Carroll 1992). As a concrete illustration from another research area, secondary school students may decide to attend universities, and may do so in light of the main chances in society that higher education has to offer. But many undoubtedly attend universities as a taken-for-granted matter, without having ever made any decision. Ironically, the American researchers who study the situation as if it reflected actual decisions probably come from families where college attendance would have been a taken-for-granted nondecision. This reflects the preferred ideologies of a liberal individualist society, emphasizing the centrality of individual choice in social life.

Second, thus, a red line of opposition exists, celebrating the conflict between the two lines of thought (this is captured in Mizruchi & Fein 1999). As noted above, this cannot reflect simple tensions between explanatory models. In fact, it reflects institutionalized normative considerations. It is most difficult in the modern liberal context to speak of the individual (or derived organizations and states) as a social construction. In these societies, political life is built and legitimated on the prior choices of people and assessed in terms of its benefits for their needs. Economic life is legitimated as a complex mass of decisions of autonomous consumers, workers, investors, entrepreneurs, innovators, and so on. Cultural and religious life are celebrated arenas of autonomous individual choice. In this context, deconstructionist languages are also delegitimating and disrespectful. In parallel, beyond directly normative postures, it has become axiomatic in modern sociological theory and methodology that the researcher should look at the world from the point of view of the participants as if they were actors (e.g., Alexander 1983, Giddens 1984, Coleman 1986).

In any event, the more phenomenological sociological models raise tensions of a normative as well as an intellectual kind, and a tradition of apologetics arises around them (e.g.,

DiMaggio 1988, Scott 2008a). I note below some forms such ideas take.

Third, however, the red line between realist and phenomenological lines of argument is essentially an American phenomenon, reflecting the politics and ideology of a liberal society and history. Little tension exists in European thought, given that European theorists and societal legitimating systems do not take the autonomous and hard-wired agentic actorhood of individuals and organizations so seriously. (Theoretical conflicts in European sociology tend to be about the functional nature of collective society and state, not about linkages between actors and collective society.)

Finally, in a sense phenomenological institutionalism is undercut by the liberal modern order itself. Successful institutionalization of social patterns, in this order, involves the construction on the social stage of purposive, competent, and motivated actors who appear to choose the correct and required actions. Modern society has a dramatic structure in which people on stage perform roles of very real and properly motivated actors in a realist sense. Thus, with the successful institutionalization in the United States of equal opportunity standards, any organizational manager can explain why it is reasonable and efficient for the organization to have decided on equal opportunity arrangements, even though the organization never actually decided the matter (which was thrust upon it) and efficiency is not the reason why it happened (Edelman 1992, Dobbin & Sutton 1998, Edelman et al. 1999, Dobbin 2009). Similarly, college students who never actually made a decision to attend college can nevertheless assemble properly motivated accounts of the decision they never made. The modern drama requires that the scriptwriting forces that construct actors and actions disappear from view. Social scientists have often been wisely suspicious of the realist appearances here—even economists have had fears that the nominal preferences driving choices are endogenous to the social system, not autonomous and prior.

But stable institutionalization has not characterized the world of the last half century.

Rapid and expansive social change has been endemic and has tended to make less opaque the macrosociological cultural and organizational pressures that construct the modern social actor. Very visible patterns of scriptwriting, in other words, appear and expand in this expansive world (Thomas et al. 1987).

CONSTRUCTING A STATELESS WORLD POLITY

The disasters of the first half of the twentieth century, culminating in World War II, radically weakened and delegitimated a world order built on charismatic and corporate nation-states as ultimate units of authority, with national citizenship as the master human identity. (The authority of other social structures—families with their property, traditional professions with their certificates, and bureaucracies—derived in good part from the national law and state.) After 1945, it was increasingly understood that this older world of corporate nationalism had created two world wars, a massive depression, enormous moral violations including a Holocaust, and unsustainably unjust inequalities of racism and colonialism.

In this context, a century or two of complete economic or political collapse might have reproduced a medieval landscape of particularism. But there was rapid expansion, with increased economic, political, cultural, and military interdependence—globalization has been dramatic (Luhmann 1975, Robertson 1992, Lechner & Boli 2000, and many others). In the history of the nation-state system, a standard resolution to the problem of expansive competition and interdependence was the consolidation of larger nation-state structures (Tilly 1990). And many intellectuals had long seen the necessity of a supranational state. Postwar circumstances made this possibility remote, even in Europe, and the best that could be envisioned was a set of weak intergovernmental associations in the United Nations or European Union format (Fligstein 2008).

Thus, the context provided actual and perceived high interdependence on a global scale, in a generally universalistic culture, and under world-level conditions approximating statelessness. The classic theorist of such situations is Tocqueville (1836), in his analyses of a consolidating but relatively stateless nineteenth-century United States. His observations, followed by those of the whole range of American social control theorists, such as Dewey, Cooley, and Mead, have many current parallels. Three main cultural and organizational dimensions can usefully be distinguished. All three represent expansive and secularized assertions of human agency rooted in good part outside society, in a suprasocietal or transcendental cosmos, rather than in an empire or state (Thomas et al. 1987).

Otherhood and the Rise of the Actor

If no state-like authority can arise to organize perceived interdependence and moderate conflict, then, given a generally universalistic culture and a great deal of social and economic rationalization, ideas arise that people and groups must become the carriers of responsibility and capacity to do the business. And strikingly, in the postwar world, an enormous number of professional and organizational social structures arose to assert the qualities involved. These are often discussed as if they are to be seen as ordinary actors, filled with selves, interests, and agentic capacities for the exercise of self-interest. But many of the social structures that expanded rapidly in the postwar world are conspicuous for their absence of claimed selves and interests and for their claimed agency for such universal or highly collective goods as world peace, the environment, human rights, or models of economic growth (Meyer & Jepperson 2000). And their social authority derives from their disinterested reflection of transcending purposes, not from their own interests. Adopting the stance of rising above the self, they are not mainly interested actors, so much as Others, in the old Meadian sense, and they derive their agentic authority from roots that would once have been considered religious. Olson (1965) noted that self-interested rational action tends

to have difficulty producing collective action but that there are other sorts of action, such as religious action. Since the postwar world is filled with an enormous amount of highly collective action, we can infer that much modern activity has some religious characteristics. The often-noted extraordinary sacralization of the modern individual in terms of the highest and most universal principles reflects this characteristic (as in Durkheim or Goffman; see Berger et al. 1974), and it tends to empower this individual (and the organizations and states derived from the individual) as an agent for the universal principles themselves.

Thus, we observe the dramatic rise of national and supranational nongovernmental associations, examined at the world level by Boli & Thomas (1999) and characterizing every sort of country (Drori et al. 2006). Some of these structures can be seen as interested actors, in the conventional sense. But most do not act in this sense; they rather instruct and advise actors on how to be better actors in light of general principles (including their own legitimate interests). Many are what Smith (2008) calls social movement organizations. Their authority rests in good part on their Otherhood and their absence of petty self-interests. They represent such collective and putatively universal goods as the environment, generalized human rights, or principles of rationality and progress.

We also observe the worldwide expansion of the professions and of their organization on worldwide scales. These occupations, whose authority commonly rests on their disinterested agency for general or universal principles, are the most rapidly growing ones in every society in the world. In the United States, the professional Others now vastly exceed the numbers of people in occupations that principally involve action (Wilensky 1964, Wyatt & Hecker 2006). For instance, consultants and consulting firms are endemic, as are the widest variety of therapists, teachers, trainers, and lawyers. All of these people function principally to make persons better actors, groups better organized actors, and nation-states more complete organized actors. It is hard to imagine people, groups, or countries living up to the advanced modern expectations for actorhood without the active assistance of all these people.

Finally, we observe that modern actors themselves often posture as Others, giving disinterested advice based on general principles, and de-emphasizing their own status as interested actors. Modern persons are often skilled at these advisory roles and take on postures as disinterested agents of other people, organizations, and national states (Meyer & Jepperson 2000). Modern organizations, also, often display themselves as instances of general organizational virtue—in a sense, lending very disinterested help to their nominal competitors. And modern national states commonly portray themselves (or are portrayed by others) in the same way, providing disinterested models for the world (McNeely 1995, Lee & Strang 2006). In this way, Sweden has for decades been a model welfare society; the United States (and sometimes New Zealand) a model liberal one; and Japan, in the 1980s, a model of economic growth through more corporatist arrangements.

In the current expanding but stateless world, problems of coordination and control, it is understood, must be resolved by the participating actors themselves. This requires an enormous expansion of the rights, responsibilities, and powers of the actors. For ordinary persons and groups to do this seems to require a world full of highly agentic Others: teachers, consultants, and advisors.

As Tocqueville understood, endowing actors with the expansive rights, powers, and capacities of universal agency or Otherhood can create a good deal of disorder and conflict. These expanded actors/Others must incorporate rules of various sorts, but, without much of a state, where are the rules to come from?

Rationalization: The Scientized Environment Supporting Actorhood

The roots of the empowered actor and Other in American history include the construction of wave after wave of religious mobilization

(Thomas 1989), but also of wave after wave of scientization. In the postwar world, the latter has been the main arena of expansion. And expansion, worldwide, has been explosive (Drori et al. 2003). Arenas subject to scientific authority and inspection have grown to include every aspect of natural and social life, from the details of sexuality to the putative origins of the universe. The authority of science to address all sorts of questions has expanded remarkably.

Much of the expansion of science, historically and in the current period, is little related to immediately perceived functional or instrumental requirements. Rather, science functions as a cosmology or as a cultural canopy establishing principles that the world can be understood in an integrated and standardized way by everyone in common (Frank & Meyer 2007). In this sense, science works to buttress claims to expanded human agency.

The postwar expansion of scientific rationalization has been most dramatic in the social, rather than the natural, sciences (Fourcade-Gourinchas & Babb 2002, Frank & Gabler 2006, Drori & Moon 2006, Fourcade 2009). If the nineteenth century established the principle that the natural world could be analyzed in universalistic terms, the late twentieth century established the principle that the social world was similarly lawful and that social scientific Others could advise anyone anywhere in the world independent of what used to be celebrated as local culture (see Boyle 2002 for the case of female genital cutting). Thus, history and, even more, the humanities decline relative to social science in the world's university curricula (Frank & Gabler 2006), and the doctrines of social studies rather than history take increasing precedence in mass education worldwide (Wong 1991, Schissler & Soysal 2005).

The expansion of science provides a basis for agentic actorhood in every arena of social life. And, as universalistic cultural material, it provides a basis for legitimated cooperation and social control everywhere. The underlying assumptions that nature (including social nature) is consistent everywhere, rationally comprehensible, and ultimately not in internal conflict reflect secularized versions of older religious ideas. The extended use of such assumptions, in legitimating expanded social control, commonly goes far beyond the actual competence of the scientific knowledge system, and there is often an undercurrent of public skepticism about the matter. Nevertheless, much public organized action is ultimately legitimated by presumed scientific knowledge (e.g., about the causes of national development, the decline in the ecology, or the causes and treatment of psychological and social problems).

Ontology: Constructing the Person as Primordial Actor

The destruction of fascism, and to some extent the Cold War, undercut several important forms of modernity. First, the nationalist state, seen as a sacralized or primordial actor, was delegitimated. As indicators, compulsory universal conscription, the rejection of dual citizenship, the delegitimation of migration, and extreme punishments for treason all declined. And nationalistic doctrines defining human membership as embedded in completely unified culture, language, race, and religion weakened, undercutting national solidarities (Huntington 2004). Second, all sorts of corporatisms, celebrating a national society made up of groups (starting with the authoritative family), were weakened: The national and global scrutiny of relationships inside families, work organizations, professions, and communities greatly expanded. All these relationships were increasingly defined as built on the choices of individuals as actors. In the same way, in principle (though less often in practice), national polities were legitimated as democratically rooted in, and serving, their people. Thus, individual human rights to choose (or unchoose) family relationships, religious memberships, national elites, or national citizenship greatly increased.

In large part replacing formerly legitimated states and corporate groups as primordially constitutive structures, the postwar world saw the striking rise in global principles of the human rights of all individual persons (Soysal

1994, Lauren 2003, Cole 2005, Boli & Elliott 2008, Stacy 2009). Even before the end of the war, the leaders of racist United States and imperialist United Kingdom agreed in an Atlantic Charter on principles of universal human rights that would undercut both polities. And the United Nations was grounded in part on a Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Subsequent decades saw an explosion of national and international treaties and instruments celebrating the primordial rights of all human beings (Elliott 2007, Elliott & Boli 2008, Koo & Ramirez 2009). An ever-expanding array of rights is involved (Boli 1987)—rights to health (Inoue & Drori 2006), education (Ramirez & Ventresca 1992, Chabbott 2003), cultural and religious freedom, self-expression, political participation, reproductive freedom (Barrett & Frank 1999, Barrett & Kurzman 2004), and so on. The rights are expanded, explicitly, to an array of types of persons: women (Berkovitch 1999, Ramirez et al. 1997), children (Boyle et al. 2006), the elderly, indigenous people (Cole 2006), handicapped people, people of all races and ethnic groups, and so on (Koenig 2008). And the rights penetrate down, in principle, deeply into social structures: Old intrafamilial patterns are now delegitimated as abusive, as are traditional authoritative relationships in classrooms, firms, and army barracks (Thornton 2005, Suárez 2007).

Furthermore, the institutionalized view of the person changed, befitting the new role of the individual as actor on whose choices and actions the whole social world depends. Individuals came to be seen not only as entitled to rights, but also as active agents pursuing these rights and a wide variety of social interests. The modern individual, as actor, is endowed with enormously expanded competencies and powers as protagonist, not only beneficiary, in society. The principles involved are worldwide, and they obviously change social organization everywhere. Classically, peasant mobilizations often involved expanded demands for paternal protection from elites or the state—contemporary persons, as actors, demand empowerment.

THE MODERN SOCIAL ORDER

Under the cultural and associational conditions outlined above, the outlines of modern society become clear. The scriptwriting Others of the world prescribe agentic actorhood for individual persons. And they prescribed very agentic actorhood for the organizations and national states built by these persons. Actorhood means the enhanced standing of the entities involved and their empowered comprehension of the scientized and rationalized environment in which they are to act. Even very traditional structures such as European universities, for instance, are now to become purposive organizations and to function as entrepreneurs in a changing environment that demands choice, innovation, new partnerships, and involvement in lifelong learning (Clark 1998, Jakobi 2009).

One clear consequence, on a worldwide scale, has been the explosion of education, as individual persons are both entitled and obligated to expansively incorporate the rationalized and scientized knowledge system. Educational expansion is little linked to social and economic complexity—it occurs everywhere in the world, with the rapid movement toward universal primary and secondary education (Meyer et al. 1992), even more rapid expansions of higher education (Schofer & Meyer 2005), and the rise of a general principle of lifelong learning both inside and outside the school (Luo 2006, Jakobi 2009). By now, something like 20% of a cohort of young people in the world can be found enrolled in higher education. The education involved is surprisingly standardized around the world (Benavot et al. 1991, Baker & LeTendre 2005). It removes individuals from family and community and links them directly to universalistic and rationalized cultural rules. Increasingly, the curricula involved in both mass and higher education avoid subordinating the individual students to the principles of universalistic knowledge and incorporate them as active participants in the knowledge system (McEneaney 2003, Frank & Meyer 2007, Bromley et al. 2009), playing a formerly religious role as agents of transcendental laws.

They become, thus, legitimately empowered and agentic actors. In an earlier period, professorial responsibilities shifted from conservators of knowledge to producers of it. In the current period, the pedagogical ideal is that students should make the same shift (McEneaney 2003).

As these highly schooled persons enter society, they enter a world transformed to greet them. In the modern society, participatory organizations are found everywhere (Drori et al. 2006). The expansion of formal organization has been dramatic and has taken place in all sorts of societies around the world, not simply the developed ones. Government agencies lose their classic bureaucratic form rooted in state sovereignty and become more autonomous organizations (Brunsson & Sahlin-Anderson 2000). Nongovernmental organizations spring up everywhere, out of formerly less formal arrangements (Hwang & Powell 2009). Structures formerly rooted in autonomous Weberian professionalism, such as hospitals, schools, and universities, become organizations and take on the managerialist trappings of purposive actorhood. Similarly, business structures increasingly become rationalized organizations (for the European case, see Djelic 1998, Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson 2006, Fligstein 2008). And in becoming organizations, older structures indeed acquire the properties of actorhood: clear purposes and missions, plans and strategies, sovereign decision structures, internal coordination and control systems, and so on (Walgenbach 2000, Drori et al. 2006, Hwang 2006). These structures derive their contemporary authority from the commitments of the now-professionalized and highly participatory persons who comprise them (Wilensky 1964).

Thus, contemporary societies are increasingly filled with very highly schooled persons, at least ceremonially or culturally linking their highly empowered human rights and capacities to the comprehension of the universalistic laws of a very rationalized natural and social environment. The resultant persons are prepared and entitled to enter social life in the modern participatory organization, which assembles their individual actorhood in great collective forms.

This trend is more than a statistical process of expanding schooling and expanding organization. It is celebrated, worldwide, in the modern stratification system. Contrary to the nineteenth-century theoretical expectations that the modern stratification system would give precedence to the holders of economic and/or political power, the modern prestige order ranks at the top educated persons, holding professional occupations. At the very top are those schooled professionals who most stand as Others, reflecting universal truths of rationality, law, and science, and who least bring their agentic powers to the service of local interests, including their own. Otherhood, rather than successfully interested actorhood, ranks at the top of the prestige system, worldwide. These Others parallel high priests in a knowledge society.

CORE THEMES OF INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

I review here the core ideas of institutional theory that have proved to be most interesting in the analysis of the rise and character of modern world society (Finnemore 1996, Meyer et al. 1997, Wobbe 2000, Greve & Heintz 2005, Krücken 2005, Dierkes & Koenig 2006, Drori & Krücken 2009; see the bibliography by Boli et al. 2009).

Others and the Construction of the Expanded Modern Actor

On one core issue, institutional arguments have clearly won out. There is widespread agreement that modern social and cultural environments are filled with models of actorhood. Modern nation-states obviously come under much global instruction, and the more they are linked to the external world, the more pressures come on (Strang 1990, McNeely 1995). Proper economic policies are developed and diffused (Hall 1989), educational, political, and legal structures are elaborated (Meyer et al. 1997), and so on. Similarly, modern formal organizational forms diffuse through national and world

environments (Czarniawska & Sevón 1996, Drori et al. 2006, Greenwood et al. 2008). And notions of proper individual actorhood, similarly, are greatly elaborated in world society, especially in educational systems (Schissler & Soysal 2005, Benavot & Braslavsky 2006, Baker & Wiseman 2006). The matter is no longer questioned: Expanded actorhood, across sectors and countries, is best practice.

The question now turns to the issue of what produces the environmental models of actorhood that achieve legitimacy (see the balanced discussions by Haveman & Rao 1997, Rao et al. 2005). Realists, conceding the existence of authoritative models of actorhood in modern environments, argue that these models are constructed to their advantage by powerful and interested actors. And concessions on this point are characteristic of the apologetics of institutionalism (DiMaggio 1988, Powell & DiMaggio 1991, Scott 2008a). In this scheme, models of national economic policy are forced on the world through American dominance or through the power built into the World Bank. And even when it is clear that professionals and nongovernmental associations are central, realists treat these bodies as carrying out power-grabbing projects.

Clearly, processes reflecting interested power do operate. On the other hand, institutionalists credibly observe the model-building power of Otherhood, found in all sorts of professions, associations, and national models that are validated in terms of scientific truth and the universal rights of human beings. Western professionals, not Japanese corporatists, celebrated models built on Japanese economic success in the 1980s. Similarly, movements for the rights of women, children, or gays and lesbians are hard to trace back to the power of these groups, or to the interests and powers of the economic corporations and political states thought to dominate the globe. And it is difficult to envision what mixture of political and economic domination generated a powerful world environmental movement (Frank et al. 2000, Ignatow 2007).

Institutional arguments seem clearly called for in such cases, which are obviously very common. These arguments have further advantages in their capacity to explain important directions of change. First, institutional arguments can explain not only how models of actorhood are created in the contemporary world, but also why these models prescribe ever-expanding and often costly dimensions of agentic actorhood. In an expansive world, the actorhood of individuals, organizations, and national states continually grows (Kim et al. 2002). One might try to explain this through inflationary versions of realist processes of competition (Collins 1979). But many competitive processes would clearly slow actorhood expansion: Supposedly dominant groups did not gain from the expansion of the rights of women or gays and lesbians or from the elaboration of extreme environmental rights. From an institutional point of view, such changes are easier to understand, as squadrons of prestigious Others built theories of a stable world based on universal principles.

Second, institutional arguments help explain why preferred models of the modern actor celebrate cooperative and virtuous actorhood even more than successful actorhood. The nation-state may have a murderous history and the capitalist firm cut-throat tendencies, but the models put forward in the current period are striking in their emphasis on cooperation and good actor citizenship in the globe. The rules, in other words, not only are universalistic, but also provide for a universal, orderly social control system. So the good business school can train competitive business elites, schooled in corporate social responsibility, with equanimity (Moon & Wotipka 2006, Shanahan & Khagram 2006, Sahlin-Andersson 2006), and the good political science institute can freely consult with nominal adversaries in other countries. Models of the modern actor stress cooperation in a global or universal order and good global citizenship, just as in the American society depicted by Tocqueville (1836), but less sympathetically by Sinclair Lewis (1922, not to mention Foucault 1991, Miller & Rose 2008).

Persons and Groups Adopt Expanded Models of Actorhood

On a second core theme of institutional theory, there is now a similar consensus. There is widespread agreement that external models have great impact on the identities taken on by modern persons, groups, and societies. Expanded models of actorhood spread down into the social life around the world. Nation-states adopt the expanded economic, political, social, and cultural forms specified in the global environment (Strang & Meyer 1993, Meyer et al. 1997). Social groups become organizations, and as organizations take on forms of expanded rationalized actorhood (Mendel 2002, Drori et al. 2006, Jang 2006, Greenwood et al. 2008, Hwang & Powell 2009), individual persons rapidly acquire expanded senses of identity associated with much higher educational and occupational aspirations (Schneider & Stevenson 1999, Frank & Meyer 2002). The whole matter is little contested, now.

The issue now turns to the question of causality, or the mechanisms by which institutionalized models penetrate states, organizations, and individual identities. Realists give priority to forces of coercion and control and to the more invidious forces of hegemonic socialization. So nation-states come under pressure from the World Bank or more subtle pressures from the dominant countries in the world stratification system. Organizations struggle for credibility in the eyes of important constituents. Individuals respond to a stratification system giving pride of place to the schooled and to the modern cosmopolitan professions. Clearly, forces of these sorts operate in the modern social system.

But most realist theories have difficulty accounting for the voluntaristic eagerness with which people and groups around the world espouse models of advanced and rationalized actorhood. Third World national states most avidly sacrifice their traditional cultural identities and adopt schooling models reflecting standard global values (Finnemore 1993). Organizations everywhere seek out advanced models of managerialist actorhood (Hwang & Powell 2009), and an epidemic of strategic planning and mission statement writing characterizes even the hidebound world of the university. Individual persons actively seek out all sorts of expensive therapies, instructional systems, and consultants. Indeed, the world's consulting industry is an astounding success at every level of social structure, from individual to global intergovernmental organization.

Institutional theories do better at describing or explaining this system and its dominance in the postwar period. Actorhood is the culturally preferred or demanded identity, and persons and groups eagerly pursue it. In fact, they seem to prefer expanded actorhood at some cost in the successful attainment of the goals involved, and individuals, states, and organizations routinely devote resources to maintaining the most admired identity claims, however implausible these may be (e.g., Schneider & Stevenson 1999, Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui 2005). Individuals maintain greatly exaggerated aspirations, just as nation-states claim responsibility to accomplish all sorts of progress in the future and to maintain extraordinary levels of human rights (Tsutsui & Wotipka 2004, Wotipka & Tsutsui 2008).

Realist models, built on pictures of actors as bounded, tend to see actor and environment as sharply distinct. This means that realist theorists must find motives for systemic actors to advance their models and motives for local actors to adopt or resist these models. But if the modern actor is constructed out of materials from the wider social environment, it has them built into its internal structure.

Thus, the modern national state is filled with functionaries and offices that are direct reflections of world institutions and professions—ministries of education, say, or of economic development, or of health. As world-level professional standards and policies change, the associated domestic professionals change their standards, too—perhaps the nominal local sovereign does not even know what is going on, or why. Similarly, the modern organization is filled with specialized professionals

representing widespread policies and associations. As professional and associational bodies change their rules, the mentalities of their local representatives change, too. If modern organizations are managed by people whose principal continuing identities are as MBAs from leading business schools, it requires little explanation to understand why changes in business school ideology would be reproduced with only the most modest decision processes. Frank et al. (2000) see such professionals as receptor sites for standards evolving in wider environments. Indeed, they have something of an obligation to betray the interests in the local setting in preference for putatively universal principles.

In exactly the same way, the modern individual, schooled to limits previously unimaginable, carries a whole external and often universal culture as a legitimated actor. A good deal of conformity to changing external standards of policy and behavior—say, in reaction to changed norms celebrating the rights of gays and lesbians—would be routine.

In all these cases, conformity to evolving external institutions would be most rapid among those actors best linked in to the wider environment, through worlds of associational life (e.g., nongovernmental memberships) and cultural life (e.g., through extended schooling). And in all these cases, the flow of institutionalized material down into the structures of actors might look "mimetic" (DiMaggio & Powell 1983). The term may have been ill chosen, as it implies an unconscious process. In fact, actors are often highly conscious of institutionalized rationales because these are part of their scripted motives. It is easiest to articulate the rationales for the most highly stylized policies: A modern young person could give a much more elaborate account for a nondecision to attend college than for an alternative outcome.

Decoupling: The Relation between Actor Identity and Practice

A renowned problem in sociological thinking is the disjunction between preferred actor identities and the practical activities that are undertaken. At the individual level, there is the notorious inconsistency between values and actions (LaPierre 1934, Cancian 1975). At the organizational level, there are the great gaps between structures and practices (Dalton 1959) or formal and informal structures. At the nation-state level, disconnections between policies and practices are extreme (e.g., Hathaway 2002, Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui 2005, Cole 2005). In theories taking the realist form of action theory, activity is chosen by agentic purposive actors, so great inconsistencies are difficult to explain (economic theory tends to rule them out by definition). They are variously analyzed as mistakes, temporary dysfunctions, instances of corrupt or manipulative suboptimization, or sources of stress and instability. But they seem to be stable and often unproblematic.

In institutional models, such inconsistencies are to be expected (Meyer & Rowan 1977; see especially Brunsson 1989, 2006). Modern actor identities, elaborated by Others, are constructed to symbolically resolve great cultural problems—for example, accounts of world peace, individual success and happiness, or organizational efficiency. In an expansive but stateless world society, they are elaborated far beyond realistic considerations. And they are constructed to provide cultural accounts for the solution of problems that, it is imagined, will not otherwise be solved. At the individual level, the ideological depiction of the voter or consumer as well informed and agentic clearly solves cultural problems defined dramatically in the long literature expressing fears of the rise of an anomic mass society. At the organizational level, the construction of the human resources department helps account for why the inequalities involved in hiring and promotion are not inequities (Dobbin 2009). At the national level, human rights policies and programs explain why massive inequalities do not undercut nominally fundamental equalities (Tsutsui & Wotipka 2004, Wotipka & Tsutsui 2008). In each case, of course, perceived problems calling for expanded actorhood are likely to persist despite elaborated actor identities. In fact, to some

extent, precisely the actors least able to comply with institutionalized scripts are most likely to adopt these scripts: Some impoverished Third World countries adopt very advanced policies promulgated in world society despite (or because of) great incapacity to carry them out (Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui 2005).

This situation might lead realist theorists to discount the whole modern process of expanded actor construction because, if no consequences follow, what is the point? But realists, committed to the notion that actions result from intentions, cannot easily take this way out. It is easier for them to imagine that local actors adopt environmentally approved policies and structures strategically, intending not to comply with them in practice. But this theoretical resolution does not explain why putatively powerful environments, able to enforce policy adoption, do not also enforce compliance.

The core institutional theory idea that actorhood is a scripted form more than a hard-wired reality helps explain the situation. If forms of actorhood are adopted from wider environmental principles, so are associated practices. But given the diffuse character of the modern actor, there is little reason why identity forms and behavior would be closely associated. They penetrate local situations through different processes and at different rates. Thus, Ramirez and associates (Ramirez & Cha 1990, Bradley & Ramirez 1996, Ramirez & Wotipka 2001; see also Charles & Bradley 2009) note that the postwar women's movements generated a wave of policies supporting female educational participation. Country adoption of such policies, they observe, had little effect on female enrollments in higher education. But female enrollments expanded in the period in every sort of country, with or without national policy. Similarly, Abu Sharkh (2002) observes no practical effect of ratification of International Labour Organization prohibitions against child labor, yet a massive decline in child labor occurred in every sort of country. Something of the same pattern may occur with human rights treaties and practices—it is difficult to tell given unstable measurements, worldwide, of the relevant

practices (Hathaway 2002, Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui 2005, Cole 2005). In contrast, Schofer & Hironaka (2005, Hironaka 2002), examining the implementation of environmental protections, find evidence for diffuse world-level wave-like positive effects of global standards but also specific and direct effects through national-level organizational implementation.

The institutional theory of decoupling observes that, in the modern system, actor identities—structures, policies, plans, and constitutions—are statements about what should happen, but will probably not happen (Brunsson 1989, 2006). The more participants subscribe to the interests of sustaining their actorhood, the greater the overall pressure to conform, but those who conform may not be the same participants as those who adopted the plan. For academic instance, individual rates of planning to publish an academic article may indicate a widespread academic value in leading universities, in a Durkheimian way increasing the number of articles written, rather than predicting whether an individual will publish an article.

Mobilization in the Modern System

The modern inconsistencies between actor identities and actor practices provide many bases for expanded Otherhood. The previous successes of the Others mean that every modern country could now legitimately be conceived to be a failed nation-state. Every organization could be assessed a failure. And every individual person in the world is utterly inadequate by modern standards of competently agentic command over political, economic, social, familial, religious, and cultural choices.

This situation provides many bases for expanded Otherhood and for further mobilization of the rationalized modern system. Others are desperately needed to provide instruction, consulting, and repair, as every actor requires help living up to expanded standards. And the highest-status Others—the scientists, social scientists, lawyers, and theorists—have every basis on which to develop even more expanded

standards for corrected actorhood. The studies and analyses of Others, in this dynamic system, can find the greatest gaps between standards and practices in every area of social life anywhere in the world. Such studies, of course, expand bases for legitimate mobilization and, consequently, still further expansions in the imagined powers and responsibilities of actors.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary phenomenological institutional theories recover the old institutionalist conceptions of people and groups as highly embedded in wider cultural material. The important change is that contemporary institutional schemes operate by building their cultural material into the roles and identities of persons and groups now conceived as highly legitimated and agentic actors. Expanded and globalized modern systems of social control construct expanded models of proper persons, organizations, and states. Legitimated and competent agency, in this system, is derived from transformed versions of much older religious ideas: scientized notions of natural and social orders as operating under universal scientific principles, and notions of the human individual (rather than corporate bodies) as bearing natural rights and competences. Actor agency is made real through the highly expanded educational systems now found everywhere. These meld the principles of scientized knowledge into the selves of entitled persons, constructing empowered individual actors capable of building society through their choices. Much social structure, then, turns into modern formal organization, assembling individual actors into structures of mobilized participation.

The individuals and organizations so created now with the standing of agentic actors, commonly act on behalf of the great principles that empower their agency. Far from ordinary self-interest, they often act as mobilized Others, creating expanded versions of actorhood. The result is decoupling because actual individual and social capacities are far from the expanded standards created and there is a constant continuing reliance on a wide variety of consultants and teachers. But the gaps between the global cultural depiction of actors and their practical capacities, especially visible in the world's peripheries, also create continuing bases for further mobilization. Everywhere there are injustices and inconsistencies, made visible through forms of scrutiny including scientific measurement and investigation. The injustices, in a stateless world, call for further expansions in the imagined capacities and responsibilities of the human and organizational actors.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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