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FIELDS, POWER, AND SOCIAL SKILL: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE NEW INSTITUTIONALISMS

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Abstract

"New Institutional" Theories have proliferated across the social sciences. While they have substantial disagreements, they agree that institutions are created to produce local social orders, are social constructions, fundamentally about how powerful groups create rules of interaction and maintain unequal resource distributions, and yet, once in existence, both constrain and enable actors in subsequent institution building. I present a critique of these theories that focuses on their inadequate attention to the role of social power and actors in the creation of institutions. An alternative view of the dynamics of institutions is sketched out based on a more sociological conception of rules, resources, and social skill.

Introduction[*]

There has been increased interest for almost 20 years across the social sciences in explaining how social institutions (defined as rules that produce social interaction) come into existence, remain stable, and are transformed (for some examples, see in political science, March and Olsen, 1989; Steinmo, et. al., 1992; Cox and McCubbins, 1993; Krehbiel, 1991; Shepsle, 1989; in sociology, Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Scott, 1995; Scott and Meyer, 1983; Powell and DiMaggio, 1991; Fligstein, 1990; Dobbin, 1994; and in economics, Simon, 1957; Williamson, 1985; North, 1990; Milgrom and Roberts, 1992; Jensen and Meckling, 1974; Arthur, 1988).[1]

There is substantial disagreement both within and across disciplines over almost all facets of this problem. Scholars disagree about what is meant by institutions. Some see them as consciously constructed rules or laws, others as norms (ie. collectively held informal rules that are enforced by group sanctions), and still others, as taken for granted meanings (Scott, 1995,

[*] I would like to thank Victor Nee for a conversation that helped in the framing of this paper. Helpful comments were given by Chris Ansell, Frank Dobbin, and Doug McAdam.

[1.] I apologize in advance for any obvious omissions of scholarship in what has become a voluminous literature.

ch. 3). Not surprisingly, there is also substantial disagreement about how institutions are produced and reproduced. In spite of these differences, the authors of the various "new institutionalisms" have become aware of one another, what might be called the institutionalization of the "new institutionalisms". Hall and Taylor (1994) argue that there are at four forms of new institutionalisms, what they label historical institutionalism, rational choice institutionalism, economic institutionalism, and sociological institutionalism. Within sociology, the theoretical divisions among scholars (see for instance, the essays in Powell and DiMaggio, 1991) is substantial. These gaps exist in political science and economics and the number of new institutionalisms might be much higher. Given this lack of agreement, one could suggest that it is foolhardy to propose that we are at a point where a dialogue oriented towards a critical understanding of similarities and differences is possible. I am motivated to begin this task simply because scholars from different disciplines starting from very different points of view, have come to view one another as trying to solve similar problems.

I believe that this reflects four deeply held, but unstated agreements. First, all new institutional theories concern the construction of local social orders, what could be called "fields", "arenas", or "games". Second, new institutionalisms are social constructionist in the sense that they view the creation of institutions as an outcome of social interaction between actors confronting one another in fields or arenas. Third, preexisting rules of interaction and resource distributions, operate as sources of power, and when combined with a model of actors, serve as the basis by which institutions are constructed and reproduced. Finally, once in existence, institutions both enable and constrain social actors. Privileged actors can use institutions to reproduce their position. All actors can use existing institutions to found new arenas. Actors without resources are most often constrained by institutions, but under certain circumstances, can use existing rules in unintended ways and create new institutions.

These commonalities exist, I argue, because scholars have inadvertently returned to how modern social philosophy first characterized actors and interaction in opposition to the old regimes in western Europe. The central ideas of the philosophy of "individualism" have generated social technologies that actors have become aware of, use to create identities for themselves, organize collectively, and under certain conditions, produce new institutions. Social philosophy, since Locke, creates moral arguments about how to construct a "just" and "fair" society given that individuals are actors. Institutions are social constructions that should be constituted to facilitate a "just and fair" society that allows actors to attain "ends".

Social science accepted the task of social philosophy by focussing on how society should work. But, instead of focussing on moral questions, social science has tried to provide theoretical tools for social actors to engage in a practical analysis of their situations and thus, arrive at what their options were in different social, political, and economic situations.[2]

The new institutionalisms began as narrowly framed oppositional responses to their field or subfield attempts to theorize about particular social institutions.[3] By questioning the mechanisms by which social rules are created in specific empirical contexts, the narrow

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[2] All social science theories try to analyze what "is" in order to suggest what "might" or "ought" to be. For some social scientists, rational social policy can be made using these analyses by governments. For others, analyses are meant to inform social movements about how their ends can be attained.

[3] The "new institutionalisms" began in different subfields across disciplines: in political science, the study of American politics, international relations, the history of the modern state, and comparative politics; in economics, the study of economic history, technological change, and the study of industrial structure including, market structure, law, and firm organization; in sociology, the study of organizations, politics, and social movements.

critiques became broader. New institutionalists became critics of the dominant conception of actors and social structures in their fields. Their main insight was in understanding that generic social processes existed to make sense of how rules guiding interaction in arenas or fields are formed and transformed. This is why scholars from disparate fields are intrigued about the other new institutionalisms. They are startled by the fact that other scholars have re-opened the same sets of questions: how and why are local social orders produced and what role do actors play in this?

Outline of the Argument

Institutions are rules and shared meanings (implying that people are aware of them or that they can be consciously known) that define social relationships, help define who occupies what position in those relationships, and guide interaction by giving actors' cognitive frames or sets of meanings to interpret the behavior of others. They are intersubjective (ie. can be recognized by others), cognitive, (ie. depend on actors' cognitive abilities), and to some degree, require self reflection by actors (see Scott, 1995, ch. 3, for a good review of the various bases of institutions). Institutions can, of course, affect the situations of actors with or without their consent or understanding.

New institutional theories agree about how to think about the context of interaction that produces and reproduces institutions. The major source of disagreement stems from how theorists think about actors. I critique both sociological and rational actor models for lacking insight into how action works and then, propose a sociological model that is consistent with symbolic interactionism. This helps solve a number of the problems generated using traditional models of actors in new institutional theories. From the point of view of exposition, it is useful to lay out my argument before considering the theories. The central agreement across theories focusses on the concept of fields, which can be labelled "fields" (Bourdieu, 1977), "organizational fields" (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), "sectors" (Meyer and Scott, 1983), "strategic action fields" (Fligstein and McAdam, 1994), or "games" (Axelrod, 1984). In economics, fields are consistent with current views of industrial organization (Gibbons, 1992). Fields refer to situations where organized groups of actors gather and frame their actions vis a vis one another. New institutional theories concern how fields of action come into existence, remain stable, and can be transformed. The production of rules in a social arena is about creating institutions.[4] Institutionalization is the process by which rules move from abstractions to being constitutive of repeated patterns of interaction in fields (Jepperson, 1991).[5]

Why do actors want to produce stable patterns of interaction? My position is that the process of institution building takes place in the context of powerful actors attempting to produce rules of interaction to stabilize their situation vis a vis other powerful and less powerful actors. Fields operate to help reproduce the power and privilege of incumbent groups and

4. States contain the fields in modern societies where general rules are hammered out and enforced. Fields outside of states become organized according to general rules in society and local rules that come from the interaction of groups in those fields.

5. This is an important distinction. Laws can intentionally or unintentionally create new fields. Practices can be borrowed from other fields. Either of these preexisting institutions can be used by actors to frame interactions. This process of institutionalization is separate from and even somewhat orthogonal to the original production of the laws or practices. As actors interact, they may end up structuring a field that was unintended by the original institution builders.

define the positions of challengers.[6] While incumbent groups benefit the most from fields, challenger groups gain some stability by surviving, albeit at a lower level of resources.[7]

Institution building moments occur when groups of social actors confront one another in some set of social interactions that are contentious. These moments are inherently political and concern struggles over scarce resources by groups with differing amounts of power. Another way to put this, is that institution building moments proceed from crises of existing groups (or in the language of game theory, suboptimal arrangements) either in their attempts to produce stable interactions or when their current rules no longer serve their purposes.

There are a number of ways stable institutions can be built. Some groups come to dominate and impose a set of rules and relations on other groups. An outside force, such as a government, can enforce order and privilege itself or its most favored groups. Sometimes groups can produce a political coalition to bargain an outcome that provides rules for those groups. If a situation is sufficiently fluid and large numbers of groups begin to appear, it is possible for skilled social actors to help groups overcome their differences by proposing a new identity for the field. It is important to recognize that institution building may fail: disparate interests and identities of groups can prevent stable institutions from emerging.

One of the great insights of the "new institutionalisms" is that the uneasy relationships between challenger and incumbent groups, the struggle between incumbent groups within and across fields to set up and maintain fields, and the intended and unintended spillovers caused by these struggles into adjacent fields, are the source of much of the dynamics of modern society. These struggles can be thought of as "games"; ie. social interactions oriented towards producing outcomes for each group. The possibility for new fields turns on actors using existing understandings to create new fields. Their impetus to do so, is frequently based on their current situation either as challengers or dominators. In modernity, the possibility of improving a group's collective situation can cause an invasion of a nearby field or the attempt to create a new one.

The problem of constructing fields turns on using "culture" in three ways. First, preexisting societal practices, that include laws, definitions of relevant resources and rules, and the ability of actors to draw on organizing technologies (for example, technologies that create various kinds of formal organizations) influence field construction. Second, the rules of each field are unique and are embedded in the power relations between groups; they function as "local knowledge" (Geertz, 1983). Finally, actors have cognitive structures that utilize cultural frames, akin to what Bourdieu (1977) calls "habitus", to analyze the meanings of the actions of others. These frames help actors decide "what is going on" and what courses of action are available to them as interactions proceed.

Once in place, fields and the social positions they define constrain actions and choice sets of actors. But this does not mean that the meanings and pecking orders of fields are uncontested. Indeed, action in stable fields is a game where actors are constituted with resources and the

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6. Incumbents refer to the dominant groups in a field while challengers refers to outsider groups. This language was used by Gamson (1974) to describe social movement organizations.

7. There are two sources of ambiguity here. People are not always aware that a field is about power. They may deem their institutions "natural" and resist a power interpretation even if it is obvious to an outside observer. Moreover, modern cognitive psychology tells us that the human mind imposes order and reason on situations even where there is not necessarily any. So, while the game played in any field will be structured around the power relations between groups, the game played in any arena cannot simply be reduced to the purposes of dominating actors.

rules are set. In the interactions of more and less powerful, the game for the more powerful is to reproduce the order.

The modern economy, state, formal organization, and social movements are both the outcome and cause of the organizing technology we call "fields". I will try and convince readers of this by reconsidering how the institutions of modern society depended on, were created by, and generated, self-aware actors who theorized this conception of actors and social interaction. It is the discovery (or rediscovery) of this theory of fields which brings scholars who have studied markets, states, political processes, and formal organizations to eye one another in their pursuit of a general theory of institutions.

New institutional theories imply questioning conventional conceptions of actors by focussing on how collective social actors orient action towards one another. Actors may be purposeful, but those purposes must be constructed in the context of their collective situations. These actors have to pay attention to other collective actors, interpret their intentions, frame their subsequent actions, and convince others to go along.

Ironically, the opportunity to rethink how actors are constituted has not progressed very far in any version of the "new" institutionalisms. There are two standard approaches, both of which reinforce the older approaches to institutions. Rational actor models stress how actors have unitary goals, know their position in the structure of relationships, and have some information as to what others are doing. This allows them to engage in what game theory calls "strategic action" (Gibbons, 1992). The more sociological versions accept that actors are collective and embedded in social relations and these relations determine the available cultural scripts. Actors have no alternative but to follow the scripts which could reflect their interests, values, roles, or norms.

What is missing from these theories is a real sociological conception of action. Rational choice models of strategic action are correct in focussing our attention on the strategic behavior of actors. But, they do not take seriously the problem of how actors are socially situated in a group and how their strategic actions are framed by the problems of attaining cooperation. One's own group has heterogeneous conceptions of identity (ie. who they are and what they want) and interests that have to be balanced in order to attain cooperation. Making sense of the behavior of other groups becomes ambiguous as the meaning of their actions is less easy to decipher for the same reason. The framing of a response requires careful cultural construction that must frame the meaning of others' action in a way that will mobilize one's own group. Sociological institutionalisms don't do much better at this problem. They focus heavily on scripts and the structural determination of action and have little insight into exactly how actors "get" action.

I pose that the idea that strategic action occurs in fields requires the notion of social skill, defined as the ability of actors to induce cooperation in other actors in order to produce, contest, or reproduce a given set of rules (Fligstein, 1997; Fligstein and McAdam, 1994; Joas, 1996). The skill required to induce cooperation is to imaginatively identify with the mental states of others in order to find collective meanings that motivate other actors. Social skill entails utilizing a set of methods to induce cooperation from one's own group and other groups (Fligstein, 1997). Skilled social actors interpret the actions of others in the field, and on the basis of the position of their group, use their perception of current opportunities or constraints, to attain cooperation.

The rest of this paper is oriented towards demonstrating that the new institutionalisms view fields as interactions between more and less powerful collective groups according to rules and shared meanings. My key insight is that the critical problem for all of the theories is

developing a more social, collective conception of action that gives rise to a better understanding of what actors do, if institutions are to be produced or reproduced.

The Constitution of Actors in Modernity

Hirschman (1997) has argued persuasively that much of how we think about actors in modernity can be captured by examining how the conception of human nature in social and political philosophy changed from Hobbes to Locke. Hobbes' view of action was that people acted for irrational reasons, their "passions". But by the late 17th century, this view of human nature had changed and was replaced by a Lockean view where actors were conceived as being driven by interest, and oriented to gaining advantage by deploying self-conscious means to attain ends.

Hobbes and Locke wanted to use their conception of human action to justify how economies and governments could be legitimate.[8] For Hobbes (1991), the irrational character of humans implied that an absolute monarch should exist to keep people from producing the "war of all against all". For Locke (1988), the proper role of government was to try and solve the complex problem of balancing off people's very different interests, while not being overrestrictive of people's natural right to pursue those interests. Locke was interested in defending the rights of property against unjust incursion from governments or other organized actors.

This debate was generated by the upheavals in the world of politics and commerce as they were being played out in England. The theory of the individual in modernity produced three insights: humans could all be actors (individuals with interests who could undertake rational action to attain their ends), actors could collectively decide to make rules to govern their interactions (produce institutions), and governments were organizations that helped make and enforce these rules. But who actually got to be an actor, what kind of rules could be made and enforced, and who got to have a say in government has been the continuous source of conflict. As a result, societies produced wide variations in institutions and arrangements.[9]

Privileged groups used early modern states to assert that they were the only people who were actors or citizens (Sewell, 1994). But the issue of who was an actor and a citizen, and what rights they could claim had been opened up by the discourse of individualism and the apparent malleability of institutional arrangements. The idea that everyone was an actor and a citizen became an ideological rallying cry for those who were dispossessed. These groups, particularly the organized working class, fought bloody battles to expand citizenship rights and change the nature of the state and economy (Bendix, 1954).

The modern state and its politics, the modern economy, and the modern conceptions of organization and power that organized these larger orders, are intimately related to who gets to be a rational actor (ie. an actor with "ends"). Social movements were able to change who got to be an actor and what they "rights" were. Social movements are usually defined as politics outside of normal channels (Tarrow, 1994).[10] Groups in social movements were

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8. This can be read as how institutions should be constructed.

9. Most of social philosophy sought to downplay the malleability of institutions and instead tried to ground them in human nature. While some have been oriented towards liberating people, much of social philosophy was oriented towards a justification of the status quo. This meant "naturalizing" what existed in order to defend the status quo.

10. Both political science and sociology have separated the study of social movements from political sociology. This separation makes little sense. Social movements are trying to open up new fields of action that could transform governments and organized politics. Empirically, it is odd to

outsiders because what they sought, was to create a society where they were actors and where governments were forced to be reconstituted to attend to their interests. Where groups sought revolutionary change, the goal was to produce a "state" where all had rights that the current regime denied them.

This does not mean that all people are or ever were equally constituted as actors.[11] Indeed, as people struggled to get recognized as actors, dominant groups continuously found new ways to change that definition. Laws and existing distributions of resources, and even the ability to define what resources are important for privileges, has meant that privileged groups have everywhere been successful at defending their positions (Bourdieu, 1988). These struggles are reflected in the institutions, organizations, and governments of the U.S. and western Europe, and they go on today.

Implications for Social Science Theories

The social science disciplines were trying to make sense of how people, now constituted as being able to act and affect their life chances, actually could, or in the case of sociology, could not, do so. Social science accepted the premise of the philosophic discourse of modernity that focussed on actors and the pliability of institutions and attempted to produce theories that could be applied to some situation, and then, used to change the world.[12]

This required turning the ideological assertion that everyone was an actor into a theoretical model whereby this insight could be used to analyze and predict what was going on in given situations. One way to make sense of how disciplines proceeded, is to characterize the issue as the problem of structures and actors (Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992). The general theoretical issue concerns the degree to which actors choices given their resources, the rules that define what they can do, and the position they occupy in a given social interaction, are structured. Sociological and many political science perspectives emphasized that people's positions in structures highly determined what they thought, what their interests were, and how they would act in a given situation. These theories gave priority to structural analyses in determining what might or might not occur in a given situation.

The alternative view, developed in economics, is that while resources and rules produce constraints, they also produce opportunities. This view emphasizes that actors make choices and that they act to produce the most positive outcomes for themselves. Actors enter situations, consider their resources, their preferences, and then select actions oriented towards maximizing their preferences. Actors' behaviors are predictable in several ways. If actors face similar constraints, one would expect them to behave in a similar way. Differences in

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exclude the politics of those trying to organize new fields from our analyses of politics in society in general. If one is trying to make sense of established politics, it seems ludicrous to declare how those politics got established as "not interesting". Theoretically, social movements reflect politics in unorganized fields. Studying them will certainly inform us about some of the generic social processes in the formation of fields.

11. It also does not mean that every western society converges to a single set of institutions. The real economic and political histories of these societies have produced different compromises between political coalitions thereby producing different sets of "rules".

12. In economics, theory is used to produce "positive" results about how organizing some part of the economy a certain way might turn out, and these results have "normative" implications for the efficient allocation of scarce societal resources. Some sociologists have been interested in using theory and empirical study to characterize social problems and propose social policies to ameliorate them. Others have been more interested in radical social change and providing analysis for social movements. Political scientists want to use theory to frame policy options and debates.

outcomes could only result from different initial resource endowments, or holding endowments constants, different preferences. Economics and political science, and to a lesser degree, sociology, have used this perspective.

Traditionally, the issue of whether or not choices exist, has been used rhetorically to define the theoretical terrains of the disciplines with sociology focussing on how actors do not have choices, political science using both approaches, and economics heavily focussed on choices. But the theory of action in all of the disciplines is relatively structural. The neoclassical economic view of profit maximizing actors with fixed preferences implies that people in similar social situations will behave the same, suggesting that their position in structure is the main determinant of action. The actors in traditional political science or sociological theories were either acting in their "interests" as in pluralist or Marxist theories (consistent with the economic view), or according to their values and norms in Parsonian or Durkheimian theory. If "self interest" is the value or norm operative in a given situation, then it becomes hard to tell the difference between economic and sociological models.

The New Institutionalisms in Context

What brings the "new institutionalisms" together is their questioning of what structures are and where they come from, and the role of actors in the production of structures. The theories start by replacing structures as abstract positions with the idea of structures as arenas of action which are defined by rules and groups with different resources oriented towards one another.

Neoclassical economics made a great deal of progress by ignoring institutions and organizations in their analyses of markets and focussed instead on understanding how profit maximizing actors with fixed preferences and perfect information could produce an optimal allocation of societal resources through market exchange. Markets with these social conditions produced optimal outcomes. Violations of the assumptions of this model implied in suboptimal outcomes; i.e. market failure.

Scholars began to notice two things: the assumptions of the neoclassical model were always being violated to some degree and organizations and rules were everywhere. This led scholars to begin to think that organizations and rules (ie. institutions) might serve to overcome market failure.[13] The field where much of this ferment began was industrial organization. Neoclassical theory had until the 1950s by and large, ignored the most common organization in capitalism, the firm, and instead focussed on how price theory explained market structure (Stigler, 1968).

Simon (1957) pioneered the attempt to account for why rules and organizations existed by questioning the model of action that lay beneath neoclassical economics. His critique focussed on two problems. First, people could not be profit maximizers because their cognitive limitations implied that they could not process all relevant information even if they had it, which they frequently did not. Second, if actors were self interested and engaged in exchange in the labor market, it was clear that they had incentive to pursue goals inconsistent with profit maximization of employers.

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13. This, of course, is the insight that rational choice theorists in political science took from economics. Given a world of rational actors with fixed preferences, attaining ends would depend on perfect information and finding optimal collective solutions to problems. Political rules and organizations, thus, had to overcome the war of all against all, by powerfully locking actors into procedures whereby agreement was possible.

Simon's genius was in using this modified model of action to account for the ubiquity of firms and rules. Instead of being inefficient drags on market processes, Simon realized that they helped solve the problems of bounded rationality and self interested behavior (1957; March and Simon, 1958). While owners might want to organize to attain the highest profits, those lower down in the organization would be more likely to pursue other goals. Moreover, because of bounded rationality, it would be difficult to monitor all levels of the firm, even assuming that people had bought into the overall goals of the firm.

Organizational structure and design, therefore, had to occur in order to mitigate the potentially negative effects of both of these problems. For managers, this meant producing subgoals for different parts of the organization in order to be able to evaluate if those goals were being attained. To control workers, this involved having well defined tasks, routine procedures, and easy rules of thumb to aid decisionmaking. Since neither workers nor managers could follow everything that was going on, the organization had to be set up so that higher level managers could respond to transparent signals that might indicate trouble.

There are a number of streams of thought that are related to this ferment: transaction cost analysis, agency theory, and North's early work on historical economics which tied the production of political and economic institutions to the dominance of the market (North and Thomas, 1973). The basic insight of these approaches was to consider that the ubiquity of social organization and rules must be understood as somehow efficiency generating and by implication as a response to market failure. Firms, networks, supplier chains, institutional rules, and ownership forms could all be reliably argued to play efficiency generating functions that explained their domination and variation within capitalist economies (Schotter, 1981; Williamson, 1985; Fama and Jensen, 1983 a; b).

Game theory was first used to attempt to explain how organizational decisionmakers framed their actions towards their competitors. It was not intended to overthrow neoclassical theory. Instead, it tried to reason about how the structure of the market would affect the strategic actions of firms and could produce stable and optimal outcomes (ie. joint benefits) for actors under different conditions of information, numbers of players, and the number of iterations of interactions (Gibbons, 1992; Axelrod, 1984).

Economists and political scientists realized that game theoretic arguments could apply to anywhere actors engaged in strategic action (Axelrod, 1984). The problem was to understand the nature of joint decisionmaking in a given situation sufficiently well, as to be able to produce a plausible "game". Game theory does not suggest that equilibrium will always be found, but can be used to demonstrate that decision traps can decisively prevent cooperation and produce suboptimal outcomes (Scharpf, 1988).

The issue of the efficiency of institutional arrangements is one of the frontiers of new institutional theory. If new institutional theory began with the idea that institutions could be efficient, it could also lead to the conclusion that current arrangements might be suboptimal. Game theory is a tool that suggests why that might be.

North (1990) and Arthur (1988; 1991) propose an even more radical view of institutions: political or economic institutions may occur accidentally or be orthogonal with respect to producing efficient outcomes. So, for example, ownership forms may have been produced, not to maximize efficiency as agency theorists suggest (Jensen and Fama, 1980a; b), but by historical accident in different societies (Roe, 1994). Arthur (1991) argues that technologies that were not optimal could become dominant because of the production of a set of organizations, practices, and rules that supported the technology. He also suggests (1988) that the geographic location of firms might result as much from historical accident as efficiency considerations. Once in place, the sunk costs of these arrangements make them prohibitively

expensive to change. This process has became characterized as path dependence. Two versions of new institutionalisms have emerged from political science: historical institutionalism, which began mainly in the field of comparative politics, and rational choice allied with game theory, which began in American politics and international relations. Both versions started out trying to understand how the rules and organization of governments shaped the outputs of government. Their critiques were narrowly aimed at their opponents.

Historical institutionalists were mainly responding to scholars who wanted to reduce political processes to group conflict, particularly the effects of social class (Steinmo and Thelen, 1992). Scholars who saw politics as reflections of either social classes or interest groups, discounted the impact of governments on political outputs. Historical institutionalists use a set of heterogeneous arguments to focus on how existing governmental institutions define the terrain of politics and circumscribe what is possible.

Existing government organizations have very different capacities for intervention into their societies. These organizational capacities and the current definition of political crises, structure the opportunities for political action (Evans, Skocpol, and Rueschmeyer, 1985). Political traditions and the roles they specify for various actors in different societies also shape what kinds of policies make sense (March and Olsen, 1990). Political parties, ideologies, voting and traditions of political activism affect the political behavior of groups. In this way, ideologies of "civic duty" and "civil service" can affect people's behavior as well.

Piersen (1995) has drawn on two types of social metaphors, "unintended consequences" and "path dependence" to suggest that political organizations and institutions can and frequently do set limits on current political actors' preferences. Lawmakers may set up institutions that can get used for purposes for which they were not intended. When a new set of lawmakers returns to political problems generated by new arrangements, they must begin with the unintended consequences of previous legislation, as limits on their actions. As political institutions are put into place, they develop a certain logic of their own. That logic directly shapes the possibility of actors to enact their preferences as well.

Steinmo and Thelen (1994) go even further and argue that, under certain conditions, actors' preferences can be endogenous to the process of institution building episodes. Put simply, people figure out what they want as events unfold. Political process, thus, can matter a great deal. Actors, in these situations may exist who use new ideas to forge alliances that reorganize groups' preferences. These actors function as political or institutional entrepreneurs.

Rational choice and game theory perspectives in American politics began by trying to understand why political institutions existed at all.[14] They account for institutions by arguing that rational self-interested actors would constantly face collective actions dilemmas where their preferences would never be maximized, because there would always be other political actors to block them. Institutions come into existence to help solve collective action dilemmas by providing people with more information about the strategic actions of others and give them opportunities to make trade-offs, like "logrolling" in order that all could gain from exchange (Weingast and Marshall, 1982; Shepsle, 1989; Cox and McCubbins, 1987).

Rational choice game theoretic perspectives have been used extensively in the international relations literature where governments are characterized as unitary actors with an interest in

[14] This strategy, of course, intentionally parallels the approach in economics, where the question was, why would rational actors create firms? In politics, the question was, why would rational actors create rules and organization to do politics? Weingast and Marshall intentionally use this metaphor by entitling their paper "The industrial organization of Congress" (1982).

security who confront one another in a world without rules (Waltz, 1979). Institutions, rules to guide interactions, would only come into existence where the interests of governments converged and even then, agreements would require extensive monitoring. The problem with this perspective, was that it made it difficult to explain the postwar boom in the production of international organizations that were not security oriented. Keohane (1984; 1986) used arguments very similar to those employed in American politics to suggest that the ubiquity of international agreements had to reflect the increasing interdependence of states in various social and economic arenas and the convergence of interests encouraged them to produce intergovernmental bargains.

Both institutionalisms start with the question of how political organizations and institutions matter for political outputs. Both agree that politics occurs in political arenas where processes follow rules in the context of a given set of organizations. The major source of disagreements stems from their differences of opinion about what motivates action in the first place and the degree to which institutions shape action. Rational choice perspectives focus on how rational actors produce institutions that reflect their interests, given fixed preferences and a set of rules, through a gamelike process of strategic action. Historical institutionalists are willing to say that actors interests and preferences matter, but argue that this is more dependent on existing organizations, institutions, and political opportunities than rational choice theorists would generally allow (Piersen, 1995; Evans et. al., 1985). The main disagreement between the perspectives, concerns the degree to which preferences could be endogenously determined. If preferences are a product of situational social roles or the "current" crisis which causes actors to rethink who they are, then rational models are less able to predict what might happen. In sociology, the new institutionalism began as one of a set of critiques of Simon's rational approach to organizations. Simon's approach had become formalized into the view that the people who ran organizations could scan their environment, perceive their problems and engage in rational organizational redesign to adapt to changing circumstances.

Scholars began to realize that the world external to an organization was a social construction (Scott and Meyer, 1991). They began to question whether or not environments offered clear signals as to what was going on and if it was possible to judge which strategies promoted organizational survival. This meant that "efficiency" might be a myth and organizational action was more about appearing to be legitimate than undertaking "rational" actions (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

One important insight was to begin to theorize about organizational fields or sectors, defined as arenas of action where organizations took one another into account in their actions (Scott and Meyer, 1983; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Institutions were thought of as the meanings (both general in society and specific to the context) that structured fields and helped guide actors through the muddle around them. They defined who was in what position in the field, gave people rules and cognitive structures to interpret others' actions, and scripts to follow under conditions of uncertainty (Jepperson, 1991).

Because of uncertainty, the new institutionalists argue that organizations in fields tend to become isomorphic. This occurs through mimckry, coercion, or normative pressures (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Competitors, professionals, suppliers, or customers can bring about organizational change. Governments are heavily implicated because they set rules for societies as a whole and often force conformity upon organizations (Meyer and Scott, 1993; Fligstein, 1996).

The view of action in sociological versions of the new institutionalism is complex. The more structuralist versions of the new institutionalism argue that fields produce few choices for

actors and instead focus on how taken for granted meanings in institutionalized spheres have actors play parts, whether or not they realize it (Jepperson and Meyer, 1991; Scott, 1995).

But a less structuralist position implies that the murkiness of organizational worlds means that rationality is a story that actors use after they decide to act (White, 1994). Preferences are not fixed, but form through action. Moreover, institutional practices might or might not produce advantageous outcomes for their practitioners. This view is close to Steinmo and Thelen's argument that preferences might be endogenous.

There are two other views that might rest somewhere in the middle, what could be termed a cultural and a political perspective. The cultural view accepts the argument that social life is murky. Interpretations are available from a number of legitimating sources; the professions, governments, and other actors in the field. This produces field homogeneity in terms of organizational structures, goals, and the rationales of important actors through mimetic processes (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). DiMaggio (1987) has acknowledged the limitations of this approach by agreeing that mimetic behavior could account for action in fields that are already constituted. In new fields, he postulates the existence of institutional entrepreneurs, visionary leaders who are able to articulate a new way to produce successful outcomes.

Fligstein (1990; 1996) has argued that fields are systems of power whereby incumbent actors use a cultural conception, what he calls a "conception of control", to enforce their position. The conception of control embedded in a field reflects the rules by which the field is structured. It operates as a cognitive frame for actors in incumbent and challenger organizations by which they use to make sense of the moves of others. In stable fields, conceptions of control are used to interpret and reinforce the existing order by incumbent groups. When fields are in the process of being formed, institutional entrepreneurs are the people who provide the vision to build political coalitions with others to structure a field, and not surprisingly these entrepreneurs and their allies end up dominating the field.

Critique

The discussion of institutions by the various new institutionalisms highlights that interaction takes place in contexts, what I have called fields. Fields are institutionalized arenas of interaction where actors with differing organizational capacities orient their behavior towards one another. The rules of the arena shape what is possible by providing tools for actors to interact, and are the source for actors to think about what their interests are, interpret what other actors do, and, strategically, what they should do.

New institutional theories agree that such social arrangements are necessary for the survival of groups and malleable to the organized actions of actors. They also agree that institutions are likely to be path dependent (ie. constrain subsequent interaction). They also agree that a set of existing institutions might get used by actors for new purposes, in ways that were unintended by those who created them. This is one way of thinking about what we call unintended consequences. Most theories would accept that institutions are "sticky". They tend not to change both because the interests of actors are embedded in them and institutions are implicated in actors' cognitive frames and habits.

It is obvious that the new institutionalisms disagree on the roles of actors, culture, and power. At one extreme, rational choice suggests that institutions are the outcome of individual rational actors interacting in gamelike situations where rules are given and resources, indexing the relative power of actors, are fixed. At the other, sociological institutionalists focus instead on how social worlds are murky, require interpretation, and actions may or may not have consequences. Actors in these theories are more socially embedded and more collective. But the theory of action is about how local cultures and social positions in fields dictate what

actors think and do, and not about interaction. Many sociological and political science discussions avoid the issue of social power entirely.

I want to explore these differences of opinion. My purpose is to argue that a more adequate theory of institutions (at least for sociologists) depends on developing a better link between the sociological notion of fields based on power and a notion of action that makes social interaction, core to the theory. The critique of both the sociological and rational choice perspectives suggests that neither adequately solves these problems. A sociological theory of action needs to take rational actor views seriously. But it must "sociologize" them by making actors collective, and motivate their actions by having them orient their strategic behavior to groups. It also needs to recognize that fields are about power in the sense that fields benefit the dominant players.

Sociological conceptions of the new institutionalism have the strength of pointing out that action occurs in fields where collective social actors gather to orient themselves to one another. The goal of institutions, in this case, is to provide collective meanings by which the structuring of the field occurs, and actors can come to interpret one another's actions in order to reproduce their social groups. Most new institutional analyses in sociology have started with institutionalized environments. Once a set of beliefs or meanings is shared, this argument suggests that actors both consciously and unconsciously spread or reproduce it. Since it is often the case that actors can conceptualize no alternatives, they use the existing rationalized myths about their situations to structure and justify their actions (DiMaggio, 1987).

Unfortunately, the theory of action in this model makes actors cultural "dopes" (Giddens, 1984) by making them the passive recipients of institutions. Shared meanings become the causal force in the argument and actors are the transmitters that diffuse those meanings to groups. Meyer and some of his students (Thomas, et. al., 1987) have taken this argument to its logical extreme by arguing that the social life in the west can be accounted for by the myth of individualism, which produces both social stability and change in fields.[15]

Most versions of new institutional theory in sociology lack a theory of power as well, which is related to the problem of the theory of action. The question of why fields should exist and in whose interest they exist, never is a focus of institutional theories. Field analysis and dynamics is rarely about power, about who is benefitting, and who is not. The theory of action fosters this turn away from issues of power by making actors' propagators of shared meanings and followers of scripts. If actors are agents of rationalized myths, and therefore lack "interests", one is left wondering, why do they act?

By virtue of its lacking a real theory of interaction and power, most versions of the new institutionalism in sociology have no way to make sense of how institutions emerge in the first place (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; DiMaggio, 1987; Scott, 1995; Colignon, 1997). Where do the opportunities for these new forms of action come from?; which actors can organize?; which meanings are available and which are unavailable and why?; why and how

15. I agree with Meyer that modernity is about the construction of the myth of individualism and the reconstitution of actors as I argued earlier in the paper. But I believe that this abstract idea is only part of the story which can be used to justify a large number of actions and social arrangements. The larger and more important part of the story is the development of defining actors, organizing technologies, and their subsequent use in state and economy building. Moreover, the purpose of institution building is for sets of actors to produce arenas of power where their positions are reproduced.

do actors who are supposed to only be able to follow scripts recognize these situations and create new institutions?

This also creates problems which run against current social theorizing, both in rational choice theory and in recent sociology. The new institutionalist model of action in sociology just does not engage the rational choice assertion that people have reasons for acting, i.e. they pursue some conception of their interests, and interact vis a vis others to attain them. Most rational choice theorists who are confronted by this sociological version of institutions respond by being puzzled. Social scientists who are looking for an alternative to rational choice, are usually frustrated by this form of sociological institutionalism because they want a creative role for actors, but not one with the stark assumptions and world view of rational choice models.

Theoretical discussions in sociology in the past 15 years imply that the production and reproduction of current sets of rules and distributions of resources depends on the skilled performances of actors who use their social power and knowledgeability to act for themselves and against others (Giddens, 1984; Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Sewell, 1992). Actors, under both stable and unstable institutional conditions, are not just captured by shared meanings in their fields, understood either as scripts as they might be interpreted by professionals or government bureaucrats. Instead, they operate with a certain amount of social skill to reproduce or contest systems of power and privilege. They do so as active members of a field whose lives are wrapped up and dependent on fields.

Rational choice theories in economics and political science are strong at pointing out how actors come together, what their motives are, and how and why they produce institutions. Institutions are defined as social organizational vehicles that help actors attain interests when markets, in the case of economics, or current laws or rules, in the case of political science, fail to do so. The theory provides predictions on the likelihood of some set of outcomes given the current interests of actors and the existing constitution of interests and rules.

It helps explain how social life is socially constructed, but along potentially explicable lines. Self interested actors have incentives to innovate and their success is often quickly emulated by others. Institutions depend on actors finding joint solutions to their problems of interaction. They may fail in this effort and construct institutions that have perverse or suboptimal outcomes.

But, rational choice and game theory models have problematic theories of power and action as well. Because actors are conceptualized as individuals, even when they represent collectivities, the nature of social arenas and the role of actors in producing, maintaining, and having positions in that arena, are undertheorized. States, political processes in general, and power are considered to be rules and resources. These form background under which rational actors play out their games.

The basic problem is that these theories miss the point that actors (decisionmakers, managers, leaders, or elites) have many constituencies to balance off and they must continuously be aware that they have to produce arrangements to induce cooperation with both their allies and opponents. So, for example, actors in challenger groups have to keep their groups together and continue to motivate them to cooperate. Put simply, social life is inherently political. Rational actor models, by treating rules and resources as exogenous, and actors as individuals with preferences, miss the creativity and skill required for individuals, as representatives of collectivities, to operate politically vis a vis other actors to produce, reproduce, and transform institutional arrangements.

This problem of rational choice accounts is what gives them their teleological feel; ie. the outcomes that occurred were the only possible ones. Non rational choice oriented political scientists and sociologists are frequently frustrated by the fact that rational choice models are uninterested in the details of the historical social processes by which arrangements are made. What they do not recognize, is that this lack of interest stems from the model of action. Once the existing rules and resources are known, actors' interests and thus their actions follow. The real negotiation within groups and across them and its effects on the constitution of interests are ruled out a priori as possibly being consequential for the outcome.

Social Skill and the Rudiments of an Institutional Theory

My purpose in the next two sections is to sketch out a particularly sociological view of institutions that can be constructed from the review and critique. I begin thinking about how these concepts help make sense of the dynamics of states and fields in contemporary societies. Of course, this account is meant to be suggestive and provocative, and not exhaustive.

A "stable" field of action can be characterized as one where the groups and their social positions are reproduced from period to period by skilled social actors who use a set of understandings about who is an actor, interpret what other actors mean by their actions, and what actions make sense in order to preserve the status quo. The reproduction of the field not only depends on reading the "other", but inducing cooperation in one's one group by convincing them of that interpretation. A field is a "game" that depends on actors, culture, and power. This generic view of fields is not just a theory, but also defines a social technology that is used and modified by skilled social actors. The conception of social action I propose, focusses on the idea of social skill, defined as the ability to induce cooperation amongst others, including of course, the manipulation of the self interest of others. Skilled social actors empathetically relate to the situations of other people and in doing so, are able to provide those other people with reasons to cooperate (Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959; 1974). Skilled social actors must understand how the sets of actors in their group view their multiple conceptions of interest and identity and how those in other groups do as well. They must have a cognitive frame to help aid in their interpretation of what is going on, that is built on these understandings.[16]

The concept of social skill I use originates in symbolic interaction (Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959; 1974; Joas, 1996). Actors' conceptions of themselves are highly shaped by their interactions with others. When interacting, actors try to create a positive sense of self by engaging in producing meaning for themselves and others. Identities refer to sets of meanings that actors have that define who they are and what they want. Actors in dominating positions, who are efficacious and successful may have high self esteem.[17] Actors in dominated positions may be stigmatized and are forced to engage in coping strategies to contest their stigmatization (Goffman, 1963).

Skilled strategic actors engage in action because by producing meaning for others, they produce meaning for themselves. Their sense of efficacy comes, not from some narrow

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16. This point of view does not just turn the "other's" perspective into whatever one thinks it is (a "spin"), but is a serious attempt to empathetically make sense of what another thinks.

17. Low self esteem might be associated with effective actors as well. People could be driven to action better in order to feel better about themselves and feel meaningful attachments to groups. But, if they have sufficiently low self esteem, they will interpret "success" as not providing evidence that they are worthy. This could bring them to continue to engage in aggressive "meaning" making projects, where they would always fail to find meaning and produce a positive identity for themselves.

conception of self interest (although skilled actors tend to materially benefit from their skill), but from the act of inducing cooperation and helping others attain ends. They will do whatever it takes to induce cooperation and if certain actions fail, they will engage in other ones. This means that skilled social actors will tend to be both goalless and selfless whereas rational actors are by definition, selfish and have fixed ends. Social skill implies that some actors are better at attaining cooperation than others because some people will be better at making sense of a particular situation and produce shared meaning for others and bring about cooperation (Mead, 1934). All human beings have to be somewhat socially skilled in order to survive. The assertion is that some people are more capable at inducing cooperation and that in fields, those people can play important roles. Skilled social action requires orientation to members of one's one group and to the field.

Social skill proves useful in creating political coalitions to produce institutions (ie. acting as an institutional entrepreneur) or holding together disparate social groups within a given field under difficult conditions. Skilled actors use a number of tactics on both their own group members but also on other groups (for a review, see Fligstein, 1997). They are adept at creating new cultural frames, using existing ones to gain cooperation, and finding ways to build political coalitions by finding compromises. There are a set of strategic skills involved in doing such things, such as agenda setting, brokering, taking what the system gives, and maintaining ambiguity. Skilled strategic actors engage in these tactics by manipulating social capital (networks), physical capital (resources), or cultural capital (symbolic claims). The motivation of actors with social skill is to provide their groups with benefits (Fligstein, 1997; Padgett and Ansell, 1994; Bourdieu, 1974; White, 1994; Coleman, 1993; Leifer, 1992; Nee and Ingram, 1997).

This conception of social skill proves very useful in understanding the problem of how fields are constructed and reproduced. Skilled social actors tailor their actions depending on the current level of the organization of the field, their place in that field, and the current moves by other groups in the field. It is useful to consider how social skill is implicated in action in fields under different conditions.

New fields open up when groups see opportunities. The crisis of new fields reflects the fact that stable rules of interaction have not emerged and groups are threatened with extinction (Fligstein, 1996). Skilled social actors will orient their actions to stabilizing their group and their group's relation to other groups. It is here that inspired skilled actors, what DiMaggio (1987) calls institutional entrepreneurs, may come up with new cultural conceptions to invent "new" institutions. They may be able to form political coalitions around narrow versions of actors' collective interests to produce institutions, as game theory implies.

It is also possible for new, unimaginable coalitions to emerge under new cultural frames.[18] This process can appear to look like a social movement in that organizations' interests, identities, and preferences emerge out of interaction. Here, institutional entrepreneurs are able to engage many groups in a meaning making project that may bring stability to the field.

In settled fields, these same skilled social actors use the rules and the ambiguity of a given set of interactions, to either reproduce their privilege or try to contest their domination. Existing fields give incumbent actors a better chance of reproducing their advantage precisely because

[18] All rational choice theories in economic and political science have resisted this idea so far. I think this reflects two concerns. First, it is difficult to see how the emergence of an entrepreneur can be predicted and if the point of theorizing is to make predictions, then entrepreneurs fall outside the context of theory. Second, game theory has relatively fixed parameters and it is difficult to imagine how one could develop a "game" where the whole point was that the game was transformed.

they imply an unequal distribution of rules and resources. If skilled strategic actors get attracted to positions of power in incumbent groups, their energy will be put towards playing the "game". Skilled social actors frame their moves vis a vis others with the end of enhancing or maintaining their group's position in the field.

It is possible in stable fields that actors may not matter a lot for the reproduction of the field. After all, dominating groups have resources and rules on their side and the dominated have fewer opportunities. This is true in murky environments, where success and failure are difficult to evaluate (for instance, schools) and the legitimacy of dominant organizations may rarely be challenged (Meyer, Scott, and Deal, 1988).

Fields can go into crisis as a result of changes that occur outside of fields, particularly in fields that a given field is dependent upon. Crises are frequently caused by the intentional or unintentional actions of governments or the invasion of a field by outsiders. Under these conditions, incumbents will attempt to enforce the status quo. Challengers may join with invaders or be able to find allies in government to help reconstitute a given field. The social fluidity of this situation suggests that new bargains are possible. But they are most likely to be undertaken by challenger or invader groups because they are the ones who are not committed to the current order.

Towards an Institutional Theory of Society?

Modernity is about the ability of people to become social actors. This means that the empowerment of people as actors has led to the explosive growth of fields. The production of fields opens up the opportunity to produce new fields by suggesting to skilled strategic actors where new benefits might be created. Institutional theory, by focussing on how actors and institutions work, opens up the link between fields, the production of new fields, and the state, and gives analysts tools with which to explore the dynamics and complexity of modernity. Institutional theories give rise to the view that society contains countless fields, millions of local orders, some of which are oriented to each other and most of which are not. It is useful to trace out some of the obvious implications of this view for understanding the relation between fields, and between fields and states.

Governments can be viewed as sets of organizations that form fields constituted by the claim to make the rules (ie. the institutions) for everyone else in a given geographic area. Since states are the arenas where the rules about who can be an actor and what they can do are made, all organized groups naturally turn to government. The making and enforcement of general rules has a huge effect on the existing constitution of fields and the possibility for new fields outside of the government. Challenger groups orient themselves to states precisely to change rules that prevent them from being constituted as actors in fields either in the state or outside of it.

"Normal" politics is often about entrenched groups using political systems to maintain their dominance of fields. Extra-legal or social movement politics is about trying to open new policy fields and creating new organizational capacity for governments to intervene for one set of groups or another. Social movement groups can try and invade established political fields and change the rules which are written against them. Their ability to succeed is a function of a crisis or political opportunity, being organized, and having a collective identity by which disparate groups can coalesce (Tarrow, 1994).

One can index the capabilities of a government by a reading of its laws, the current organization of its politics, and the construction of its fields, ie. its organizational capacity to intervene into the fields of society. The possibility for the capture of policy fields or the

production of new policy fields depends on the current resources and rules, and the opportunities presented to skilled actors by crises.

The theory of fields implies that one would never want to separate social movement politics from "normal" politics. The difference between them is that social movement politics are trying to establish a new policy field or transform an existing one, while in normal politics, incumbents are defending their privileges.[19] Thus, studying social movements ("politics by alternative means"), makes sense only if one recognizes that the alternative means are focussed on creating a new field or transforming an existing one.

This view of the state and society opens up the terrain of the dynamism of modern life. Incumbent actors in fields and their connection to political fields tend to reproduce themselves and try and disorganize challengers. But, incumbent actors face crisis either from states, induced by dependence on another field, or by invaders from nearby fields.

New institutional projects are always occurring in and across societies. Skilled social actors armed with cultural frames borrowed from one field can try and create a new field. Openings can be provided by the intentional or unintentional actions of governments. Socially skilled actors might migrate from their current field if they perceive opportunities to exploit. This means that at any given moment, fields are being formed, in crisis, and being transformed.

The problem of the relation between fields, and between fields and the state is one of the great theoretical frontiers of institutional theory. The major issue is that fields are dependent upon one another (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1977). Because of this dependency, a crisis in some field is likely to set off crises on other fields. As crises spread, pressure will be brought to bear on governments to intervene, usually on the side of incumbents. The problem is that sometimes the spread of these crises follows explicable lines. But frequently, crises are induced as an unintended consequence of crisis in other fields. While we have frequently observed such effects, we have virtually not theorized about them.

Conclusions

It is utopian to believe that the encounters between the new institutionalisms will eventually yield a common consensus about definitions, mechanisms, or the goals of such a theory (Nee and Ingram, 1997 seems more optimistic on this point). New institutional theory applied to the field of scholarship implies that scholars have a huge stake in their own research agendas, their disciplinary biases (i.e. their cultural frames), and the organizational basis of their fields (Bourdieu, 1984). In essence, as scholars, we live in fields (of scholarship) and those fields constrain and enable us. At the end of the day, we all have to be able to say that our cognitive frames are the best ones (I, of course, include myself in this).

But there is something to be gained in the encounter between disciplines and subfields. By observing the strengths and weaknesses of different perspectives, one can see more starkly how one's view is useful and limited, as well. Occasionally, one can see that there are ways to bring views of processes together in a deeper way, a way that will encourage research, and get scholars to at least see the virtue in one another's point of view. New institutional theory suggests that one cannot expect that these new insights will infiltrate the core of any scholarly field, precisely because the reproduction of that field depends on enforcing the dominant

[19] Social movement politics can be oriented towards destruction of the whole system. This means a transformation in all of the fields of the state and the rest of society. For such a transformation to be possible, it follows that a large number of fields would have to be in crisis. Such a crisis would require a societal wide disaster such as war or depression.

conception of the field. If fields succumb to other fields (i.e. sociology yields to economics, for instance), they risk colonization and absorption.

This exercise reassures me that sociology has a lot to add to these discussions, something that economics and political science will have great difficulty doing. I believe that all institutional theories need a theory of fields based on the differential power of organized actors and their use of cultural tools, and the sociological version is the most compelling.

All institutional theories need a theory of action as well. Rational choice and game theory have produced a stylized model that is attractive and intuitive. I have sketched out what I think part of a sociological alternative is. But this answer remains undeveloped in this context (see Joas, 1996, for a general argument about the importance of the interactionist model). This means there is a lot of work to be done.

In sociology, there has been another reaction to both rational choice theory and more traditional structuralist approaches, one that has been called "a turn towards the cultural", or more radically, "social constructivist". This is usually intended to suggest that all social interaction requires culture and context to make sense. This is often intended as an argument against both structural and rational accounts. But, as I have tried to show, all new institutional theories, including rational choice, view institutions as social and cultural constructs and emphasize context. Indeed, the central agreement of all of the new institutionalisms is the need for both a theory of local structure and action.

Modernity has produced the conditions under which actors can fight back under crisis conditions and produce redefinitions of fields. But it has also meant the production of effective social technologies to stabilize fields and prevent challengers from doing so. A theory that ignores either will have little luck explaining the dynamism of modernity and the unique twists and turns it has taken.

My more panoramic vision of a theory of society built from a theory of institutions is even sketchier than the theory of fields and action. To move this theory along, will require deeper delving into the links between the important organized institutions of modernity, the state, organized politics, social movements, and the economy. The theory of action and fields is a set of evolving practices, a set of myths, and part and parcel of organized social life as we live and experience it every day. We are still at an early stage in discovering it and its effects.

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