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Revisiting Institutionalism in Sociology

Putting the "Institution" Back in Institutional Analysis

Seth Abrutyn

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK LONDON

First published 2014
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Simultaneously published in the UK
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Abrutyn, Seth.
Revisiting institutionalism in sociology : putting the "institution" back in institutional analysis / by Seth Abrutyn. — 1st Edition.
pages cm. — (Routledge advances in sociology ; 116)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Sociology. 2. Economics--Social aspects. 3. Social institutions. 4. Financial institutions. 5. Social change. I. Title.
HM585.A287 2013
301—dc23
2013015909

ISBN13: 978-0-415-70276-8 (hbk)
ISBN13: 978-0-203-79535-4 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by IBT Global.

Revisiting Institutionalism in Sociology

There may not be a concept so central to sociology, yet so vaguely defined in its contemporary usages, than institution. In *Revisiting Institutionalism in Sociology*, Abrutyn takes an in-depth look at what institutions are by returning to some of the insights of classical theorists like Max Weber and Herbert Spencer, the functionalisms of Talcott Parsons and S.N. Eisenstadt, and the more recent evolutionary institutionalisms of Gerhard Lenski and Jonathan Turner. Returning to the idea that various levels of social reality shape societies, Abrutyn argues that institutions are macro-level structural and cultural spheres of action, exchange, and communication. They have emergent properties and dynamics that are not reducible to other levels of social reality. Rather than fall back on old functionalist solutions, Abrutyn offers an original and synthetic theory of institutions like religion or economy; the process by which they become autonomous, or distinct cultural spaces that shape the color and texture of action, exchange, and communication embedded within them; and how they gain or lose autonomy by theorizing about institutional entrepreneurship. Finally, Abrutyn lays bare the inner workings of institutions, including their ecology, the way structure and culture shape lower-levels of social reality, and how they develop unique patterns of stratification and inequality founded on their ecology, structure, and culture. Ultimately, Abrutyn offers a refreshing take on macrosociology that brings functionalist, conflict, and cultural sociologies together, while painting a new picture of how the seemingly invisible macro-world influences the choices humans make and the goals we set.

Seth Abrutyn is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Memphis.

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To my loving and patient wife, Danielle. Without you, this book would have been an arduous task.

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Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank my mentor, adviser, teacher, colleague, and friend Jonathan Turner for giving me the space to grow as an academic and theorist; for trusting me to stretch my legs with no discernible fear I would fail; and for reading and commenting on far too many drafts of my papers to count.

I would also like to thank those professors at UC Riverside who have been instrumental in my development as a theorist, sociologist . . . and person: Steven Brint for keeping my flights of fancy anchored in reality and for taking me seriously; Chris Chase-Dunn for treating me as a peer even when I was just a student and for challenging me to think big; Eugene Anderson for numerous coffee breaks, editorial commentary, and intellectual discourse; Peter Burke and Jan Stets for allowing me into your lab, providing an encouraging, growth-inducing, student-centric environment, and for your contributions in instilling an intense work ethic; Alexandra Maryanski for being a great mentor and for teaching me that academia should not just be rigorous but also intellectually inspiring, thought provoking, and creative; and, finally, Stephen Sanderson—I know we don't always get along, but your work and quest for the Truth left an indelible impression on me.

Two other mentors were essential to my growth as a scholar. Robert Wait, whose course on the Sociology of Emotions led me "astray" from psychology and into the arms of sociology. If you hadn't asked me to come to your office I probably would have never gone to graduate school or wrote this book. And, in *memoriam*, George Kirkpatrick was my first theory mentor, and a true friend who taught me theory was the best medicine for the soul.

Along the way, I have had the fortune of having considerate and thoughtful colleagues who have read drafts of this book and papers closely related to this book, or have been central to the development of these ideas, even in their earliest stages. Thus, a warm thank you is in order for Michael Carter, Paul Froese, Tim Gutierrez, Barbara Kuchler, Kirk Lawrence, and Isaac Ariail Reed. In addition, my newfound colleagues at the University of Memphis have been welcoming, encouraging, and supportive, and have

given me the room to grow into the job and write this book. Though each faculty member has been instrumental, I cannot help but thank Marty Levin for "protecting" us junior colleagues, Wes James for listening to my random harangues, and Anna Mueller, who has become a great collaborator and colleague willing to entertain my theoretical flights of fancy.

To be sure, I would be nowhere (literally and figuratively) without my parents Ali, Eric, Jon, and Jane. They have supported every endeavor, whether successful or not; they have celebrated every success, no matter how big or how small; and they have let me be me, unconditionally, and with pleasure. I also must thank my brother Russell and his wife Emily who have been unbelievably supportive and their daughters Tessa and Hadley, who have been both inspirations to and pleasant distractions from my work. And, for their unlimited support and generosity, and love, I thank Fred, Susan, and Helana. Finally, both of my grandmothers, Pauline and Martha, motivate me to work harder and smarter everyday with their love and their strength. A special acknowledgement, in memoriam, goes to both of my grandfathers Herman Klonsky and Milton Abrutyn; not a day goes by that I do not think of you.

Last, but absolutely not least, I must ask where I would be without my wonderful, caring, and understanding wife Danielle Morad Abrutyn. You've seen me grow as an academic from nearly the beginning, you stuck with me even in the worst moments as I wrote a dissertation that was probably too long or sweated out a tense job market, and you have supported my work and drive through everything.

Contents

Introduction

> While all see the immediate function of our chief social institutions as the securing of an orderly social life by making these conditions imperative, very few see that their further function and in one sense more important function, is that of fitting men to fulfill these conditions spontaneously
>
> —Herbert Spencer

WHY A BOOK ON INSTITUTIONS?

Why write a book on institutions, when there are so many books on them? To answer this question with a question may seem strange, but what are institutions? The concept seems so important to sociology that Durkheim once declared that "sociology can be defined as a science of institutions, their genesis and functioning" (1895 [1982]:45). I cannot, however, think of a concept so central to the sociological endeavor more poorly defined, ambiguously used, and colloquially understood in contemporary sociology. For classical theorists like Herbert Spencer and Max Weber, institutions were ubiquitous macro-level spheres of social organization that came to coordinate and control the actions and attitudes of members of a population. Institutions varied across time and space in terms of their level of differentiation and rationalization, yet every society had a kinship, political, religious, economic, and, perhaps, legal sphere of social reality. And these spheres were important axes upon which fruitful historical-comparative methods could be applied. Their interest, to be sure, was different. For Spencer (1897), institutional evolution was central to understanding how societies evolved, as well as how societies dealt with complexity, whereas Weber (1922, 1967, 1978) saw institutions, or macrosocial orders, as he tended to call them, as contested arenas in which different societies could arrive at similar points through divergent trajectories, how these trajectories could be stymied by the outcome of these struggles, and how the tendency toward rationalization led to some highly universal properties regardless of time or place. Despite their divergent interests, Spencer and Weber saw institutions as macro-level phenomena, distinct in their own right.

In fact, a review of the classical sociologists reveals a loosely coupled set of scholars studying the "general characteristics of 'society' or social order," "the comparative analysis of various types of societies and institutional complexes," and "the explanation of such variabilities in terms of social or 'natural' forces or mechanisms" (Eisenstadt 1977:60). The British anthropologists focused on preliterate societies, concluding that they differed from other configurations because kinship, as a macro-level structural

and cultural milieu, was the principal institutional domain in which people and groups acted, exchanged, and communicated (Malinowski 1922; Radcliffe-Brown 1965). The point, ultimately, was that problems like biological and cultural reproduction were the most salient concerns humans had to deal with, and it was through solutions centered on descent and marriage in which they were resolved. But what is most fascinating about these ethnographies is that they reveal the existence of other institutions, not yet structural differentiated or culturally autonomous from kinship, but that were able to make their presence felt physically, temporally, and socially. Institutions like law (Malinowski 1959), religion (Radin 1937 [1957]), or polity (Gluckman 1965) were discernible, even if they were not clearly differentiated institutional spheres.

Sociologists, of course, have long been interested in the perplexing rise of the west. Institutional analyses, in the classical tradition, were not focused on societies where kinship dominated, but conversely, in societies where kinship was but one institution among many differentiated and autonomous institutions. The question, of course, has long been why the west developed highly complex institutional complexes—or the total arrangement/relationships of a society's institutional domains—when the west was far more advanced. And, more importantly, what consequences the west's institutional evolution meant for human organization, action, and so forth (Marx 1845–6 [1972]; Veblen 1899 [1998]; Sumner and Keller 1927). What is notable in these studies, and the sociological institutionalism that followed over the last century, was the limited list of institutions a diverse body of scholars identified: kinship, polity, religion, economy, law, and education in addition to the tacit agreement about what each institution does.

One might clumsily classify this tradition of loosely coupled scholars historical or old institutionalism.[1] The tradition, for better or for worse, found its most prominent standard bearer in Talcott Parsons, who reinvented the term institutions by calling them subsystems (Parsons 1951; Parsons and Shils 1951) and bridged the classics with contemporary historical institutionalists. Parsons, like Weber and Spencer, was interested in polity, economy, law, kinship, and religion, but was too interested in theory building to elucidate why they were really important, what made them evolve, and what their evolution's consequences were for society. His interest in sociocultural evolution, as the process of institutional and societal change, came too late to be taken seriously by most sociologists; and today, neoevolutionary sociologists considered it a primitive and poorly thought-out evolutionism harkening back to 19th-century fallacious arguments (Sanderson 2007). The marginalization of Parsons, which was understandable for numerous reasons, was also the marginalization of the institutionalism of Spencer and Weber, despite the chasm between Parsonsian functionalism and classical institutionalism.

In the vacuum left by Parsons, institutionalisms of various types have sprouted, mostly focused on cultural explanations, meso-level phenomena,

and taken-for-granted institutions (Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Nee 2005; Greenwood et al. 2008). Hence the need for a book like this. Although the new institutionalisms have been successful in drawing attention to organizations, and have generated too many insights to catalog here, the idea that the macro-level of social reality exists and is distinct from the meso-level has been lost in the mainstream of sociology. Replaced by organizational analysis, institutions have become "catch-all" environments that are treated like exogenous variables in a structural equation model: they exist, but it is not important to explain them, detail their dynamics, or conceptualize them apart from organizations. Yet, institutions remain as central today as when Durkheim was asserting they are central to the study of society. To be sure, there have been numerous advances in the historical institutionalist tradition: Luhmann's (1982, 1995, 2012) rehabilitation of Parsons through the integration of symbolic interactionism, dramaturgy, and phenomenological insights; Eisenstadt's (1964b, 1965a, 1971a, 1980) dynamic reinterpretation of Weberian historical institutionalism; Lenski's (1970, 2005) models of sociocultural evolution; Turner's (2003, 2010a) evolutionary-institutionalism; and my own (2009a, 2012, 2013) work on institutional autonomy and ecology. My guess, however, is that these advances are lost in the "cacophony" of institutionalisms and the tendency to use the term in its colloquial sense. Again, there is a pressing need for a book that makes the case that institutions are things worth studying and that this argument does not need to be functionalist—even though it can draw from Parsons or Spencer—vis-à-vis the inclusion of conflict and change, or that it need be overly cultural or material.

Perhaps I can be accused of overstating the situation, but there was a time when sociologists in general *discerned* a macro-level of reality *distinct* from other levels of reality—especially meso-levels, or the organizational level of societies. And although some general theorists like Luhmann (2012) or Jonathan Turner (2010) continue to argue that there are there are distinguishable levels of reality, both analytically and empirically, sociology since the 1970s has worked to rectify the things structural functionalism ignored—for example, the micro-, the cultural, and stratification/power, all of which were necessary adjustments and inclusions. But, with the rise of the Marxist cultural program (Baudrillard 1972 [1981]; Giddens 1975; Bourdieu 1977) coinciding with the microsociological turn toward cognition, which emphasized language (Saussure 1959) and phenomenological (Schutz 1967)/ethnomethodological (Garfinkel 1964) epistemology, scripts, cognitive schemata, and the like (Knorr-Cetina 1981), the important aspects like material reality, structuralism, and the macroview of human societies were extricated . . . or, maybe more fairly, relegated to a corner. The macro-level was suddenly reducible to micro-aggregations or simply taken for granted, and the material/structural dimensions of social life were eschewed or given secondary status in favor of cultural explanations. The normative, once the dominant theoretical solution to commitment and

social control, was tossed aside for a relatively radical interpretation of Weber that rested on legitimation, taken for grantedness, and traditional authority that somehow found the agent as a creative embedded actor capable of recreating the social universe or creating it within his or her bounded rationality (Berger and Luckmann 1966; for a critique, see Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Colomy 1998); even Marx's interest in the coercive regulation imposed by real groups was replaced by the cultural emphasis on technological and consumptive alienation, and language (Marcuse 1964; Habermas 1985; Adorno 1991). Concepts central to sociology since its advent, for example, the division of labor, were turned aside, in favor of culture—as if culture was somehow distinguishable from the division of labor! Or, as Fuchs has more cogently argued,

> Microsocial reality is held to be somehow "more real" and "more empirical than macrosocial reality; and thus all sociological knowledge depends on microsociological observations for its "ultimate empirical validation." In fact, while macrosociological concepts such as "state" or "organization" can only be reified constructs lacking true empirical referents, microsociological concepts such as "interaction" and "situation" have privileged experiential access to the only objective reality there is . . . Strictly speaking, however, there *are no such things as "individuals," "interactions," or "situations" either* . . . [and they] are in no sense less "reified" and "more empirical" than, say, the constructs of "state," "revolution," or the Watson-Crick model of DNA . . . Thus, we could just as well propose that it is not individuals, but the brain in cooperation with the body that "acts"; and that we therefore must "reduce" or "translate" intentional or rational explanations into neurophysiological explanations. (1989:177–8)

In the vacuum left by the marginalization of functionalism, the mysterious disappearance of economic sociology, and the cultural-cognitive turn, a new form of organizational analysis emerged under the guise "new institutionalism." What differentiated this tradition from previous macro theories was its emphasis on the "cultural-cognitive pillar of social control," as Richard Scott (2001, 2008) terms it, and the shift from the organization to clusters of organizations as organizational environments. The institution became a broader, but vaguer, environment often composed of scripts or cultural myths (Meyer and Rowan 1977) that constrained the forms available to organizations by legitimating some forms over others. The language has varied, but the conceptual apparatus remains the same: organizations are affected by the organizations in their environment, and by murky institutional forces like mimetic isomorphisms (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) or "rules of the game" (Giddens 1984; Bourdieu 1990; North 1990). The few lists of institutions tends to favor all things, no matter how different, that endure over time including roles, organizations, ideologies, rituals, and so forth (Jepperson 1991:144–5).

The decision to write the book, and its need, is ironically supported by the recent flux of institutionalisms meant to supplement (Turner 2003, 2010; Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2012) or supplant (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012; Boltanski and Thévenot 1991 [2006]) the "new" institutionalisms. In other words, the new institutionalisms have become untenable to some degree. Thus, I do not reject microsociology—actually, I make quite a bit of use of the three decades of advances—or cultural-cognitive explanations. Rather, the ultimate goal of this book is to *put the institution back into institutional analysis*, not supplant the last 40 years of sociological inquiry. I do not think re-introducing macro-level structural and cultural formations into contemporary sociological discourse can or should threaten well-established traditions or fields, but rather supplement them by bringing in something lost with the exorcism of Parsons. In fact, if there are any lessons learned over the last four decades it's that false dichotomies are good for polemical arguments, but not good explanations of real life; there is no reason to presuppose a cultural or material, agency or structure, normative or cultural-cognitive supremacy in theory building. The theory advanced within, then, draws from Weber and Spencer, Parsons and his colleagues, new institutionalisms and their recent critics (e.g., strategic action fields); it learns from the mistakes of the functionalists, but chooses not to throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater; and it considers the neo-evolutionary schools advances as useful for constructing a robust theory of institutional change (e.g., Turner 1995, 2003, 2010a; Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997; Sanderson 1999; Lenski 2005; Nolan and Lenski 2009; Turner and Maryanski 2008, 2009).

This, then, is a book about macrosociology and what Durkheim considered the central component for a science of society: *institutions*. Questions that have been central to sociological inquiry since the 19th century will be revisited through a fresh, contemporary analysis of institutions and their relevance. Moreover, the descriptive and explanatory theory building is rooted in three questions: How can we return macrohistorical sociology to its former position in the discipline, where ambition was rewarded instead of shunned, and where generalizable, abstract theory motivated research questions? How can we build a frame of analysis that allows macrosociologists to be comfortable studying *all* human societies and not just those with nation-states or post–World War II societies? And, finally, how can we bring functionalism, whose central question remains interesting even if previous answers were often problematic, back into the sociological conversation? The goal, again, is to return the *institution* to *institutional analysis*. In essence, the theory offered throughout this book offers a more satisfying way of talking about macrosociology, institutions, and historical analyses, while supplementing the invaluable insights and conclusions organizational scholars have been researching since the 1970s. Our first step is determining, precisely, what institutions are and what they are not.

THE CACAPHONY OF INSTITUTIONALISMS

The Catchalls

For most sociologists, the concept institution is not even problematized. Generally, it is used in two different, yet similar ways: as a name for any force, mechanism, or phenomenon that endures for an indefinite period of time. We use it quite unknowingly this way, referring to a professor in our department who has been there, seemingly, forever or the university we work at. Others have taken a narrower path that identifies mechanisms that confer duties, rights, and responsibilities like marriage and property rights (Hughes 1942; Burgess and Locke 1945). In essence, there is little systematic consideration of institutions because the term can be used whenever one needs to label something enduring. The question, though, is am I making much ado about nothing?

Well, consider this: if someone provided you with a list of institutions that included a diverse array of social phenomena that included organizations, the handshake, the presidency, sexism, and so on (Jepperson 1991:144–5), would you know what an institution was? That is, are institutions so broadly defined that the differences between collectives, patterned action, role positions, and ideologies are less important than their similarities? If the answer to this is yes, then can we also define "ice cream," "scotch tape," and "rock and roll" as institutions? Ultimately, should a concept, declared central to sociology by Durkheim, be used in a colloquial, catch-all manner? This book answers definitely no! I do not take this argument lightly, nor do I intend this to be polemical. Rather, it is imperative that sociology mature as a science, which begins with some clear definitions and classifications that allow us to distinguish between the things we find interesting and worth studying.

New Institutionalisms

The most pervasive contemporary form of institutional analysis is termed new institutionalism (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Nee 2005; Greenwood et al. 2008).[2] In the gap left by the bizarre demise of economic sociology in the 1960s, the new institutionalists emerged to study organizations and organizational dynamics—in particular, formal economic organizations (Aldrich and Ruef 2006). This tradition tends to use the term institution in two contradictory ways. First, institutions are the environments (Edelman and Suchman 1997; W. Scott 2001, 2008) that shape and constrain organizational interaction and exchange. In one sense, this usage parallels the older forms of institutionalism, as it will be maintained throughout the book that institutions are constituted by collectives, among other things. What differs, however, is that this book begins with the institution as the unit of analysis, and rather than take for granted