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# Institutional Analysis and the Study of Education

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SINCE THE 1990s, a theoretical perspective known as the “new institutionalism” has captured the imagination of scholars working in academic fields that contribute to educational research and policy analysis, including sociology, political science, economics, and organization theory. The rise of this theoretical perspective has been due, in part, to a widespread disenchantment of social scientists with models of social and organizational action in which relatively autonomous actors are seen as operating with unbounded rationality in order to pursue their self-interests. It also has been due to advances in theory and research, reflected in the publication of several influential volumes showing how a “new” institutionalism could be applied to research in particular areas of study. March and Olsen (1989), for example, applied institutional theory to the study of politics broadly, and North (1990), DiMaggio (1998), Powell and DiMaggio (1991), Scott (1995), and Brinton and Nees (1998) applied it to the study of economic change and development, organization theory, and the sociological study of institutions respectively. The emergence of a new institutionalism across the social sciences signals the possibility of a new unity in these often fragmented disciplines, and it promises to provide researchers with a more universal language to describe and conceptualize research problems that are common to many fields.

Despite its promise, applications of the new institutionalism to the study of education have been scattered and diffuse (Bacharach, Masters, and

Mundell 1995; Crowson, Boyd, and Mawhinney 1996). With the exception of Rowan and Miskel's (1999) survey of the new institutionalism in education, comprehensive efforts at describing and interpreting the new landscape of institutional theory have been missing in the field. Instead, many education theorists have tended to treat institutional theory as if the theoretical models and predictions that emerged out of work by John W. Meyer, W. Richard Scott, Brian Rowan, and others during the late 1970s and early 1980s represented its final form (e.g., Meyer and Rowan 1977, 1978; Meyer and Scott 1983). This slow recognition of new developments in the ways educational institutions might be studied stands in sharp contrast to the actual changes in educational institutions occurring on the ground. New social developments, we argue, have produced novel institutional practices with which institutional theory and research in education have yet to catch up. In the United States, for example, we are experiencing enormous and (as we show in this book) consequential changes in education that are bringing about an increased level of centralization and pragmatization, an increased demand for accountability, and a heightened concern with educational productivity. New forms of educational organizations ranging from home schooling, through charter schools, to privately held firms that provide tutoring and other forms of instructional services have arisen outside public education and are on the way to becoming firmly institutionalized. At the same time there are changes in higher education, too. The emergence of a small but growing for-profit higher education sector in the United States and abroad is introducing a new element of competition and forcing established institutions to become more market minded and entrepreneurial. Three changes in particular have altered the institutional reality of education in both the K–12 and the higher education arena:

1. *Greater provider pluralism*: while basic schooling and much of higher education around the world used to be provided almost exclusively by states, rapid growth in the private provision of educational services has dramatically altered this situation; no longer a monopoly of government, education providers now come from the third sector and civil society and include private, market-oriented organizations.
2. *More tight coupling*: widespread calls for more accountability have led to a shift to more tightly coupled and narrowly controlled practices in organizations that were once exemplars of "loose coupling."
3. *More central role of educational institution in society*: in an increasingly knowledge-dependent economy, schools and colleges take on a more central role in society's institutional fabric, and their performance has definite repercussions throughout society. As a result, families, entrepreneurs, voluntary organizations, and corporate ventures take a stronger role in the governance of education, and the institutional landscape changes from a monistic to a pluralistic world.

These new institutional realities present a challenge to the reigning institutional theories in education, especially those developed by John W. Meyer and colleagues in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The institutional analyses of education developed at that time have had an enormous impact on the field—both in the social sciences generally and in education in particular. But the view of educational institutions that emerged out of that work now seems oddly out of step with current events in the field. The institutional analyses of Meyer and colleagues say the American educational system is “loosely coupled,” largely because the formal structure of schools and colleges were derived less from demands for technical efficiency than from needs to maintain their legitimacy in society. In this view, education was seen as being fully controlled by government and the professions and thus beyond the grip of market forces. Moreover, in this early version of institutional theory, change in educational organizations was seen almost exclusively as a process of evergrowing “isomorphism” of educational forms brought into conformity with the norms, values, and technical lore institutionalized by the state and the professions. Educational organizations were thus seen as “captive” (i.e., nonmarket) organizations, passively conforming to broader (and already institutionalized) forces, securing success through processes of institutional conformity as opposed to technical efficiency.

As the chapters of this book will show, however, many of these early ideas about educational organizations are undercut by changes in the field of education over the past fifteen years. Schools, it seems, are no longer shielded from the pressures of accountability and efficiency; the once airtight government monopoly of schooling has been invaded by private providers; the dominant institutional forms of schooling no longer serve as unrivalled models for emulation. Against this backdrop, this book is an attempt to reflect on, redefine, and reposition institutional analysis. It is also an attempt to catch up with some of the significant new developments occurring in education in order to develop a keener sense of institutional continuity and change in this important sector of our society.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will characterize older and newer lines of institutional analysis in greater detail and offer an overview of the book’s chapters.

#### THE INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE IN EDUCATION RESEARCH

A basic assumption of institutional thinking (old or new) is that large institutional complexes such as education, and the practices they give rise to, are contingent and contested. That is, social institutions can assume a large number of different shapes and forms, some of which appeal more to a particular

group of collective actors than others. A school, for example, can be a handful of children sitting under a tree listening to a story, a group of youngsters learning to throw a discus in a gymnasium, or a group of adolescents in a chemistry lab huddled around a Bunsen burner. The purpose of an institutional analysis is to tell us why—out of this stupendous variety of feasible forms—this or that particular one is actually “selected” and whose interests might be best served by that selected arrangement. Institutionalists want to understand the trade-offs involved in using one form of institution to the exclusion of other possible ones. They want to know what alternatives a society and its policy makers might have; which social group might be favored or disadvantaged by a particular arrangement; whose vested interests might be tied up with a given institutional form and practice. Through institutional analysis we learn something about how education connects with other vital institutions in society; what the constraints are under which this important part of our social life takes place; and what the latitude and the limits are that we confront if we attempted to change the existing institutional order.

Given formal education’s central importance within modern societies, it is not surprising that institutional analyses of education have been present in the social sciences for more than a century. From the pioneering studies of sociological founders such as Durkheim (1956) and Weber (1947), to early critics such as Veblen (1918) and Waller (1932), to contemporary sociologists such as Bidwell (1965), Archer (1984), Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), and Collins (1979), social scientists have recognized the importance of education and its institutional configurations. For this vein of research, Durkheim’s characterization of educational institutions in society is still valid:

Education has varied infinitely in time and place. . . . Today, it tries to make of the individual an autonomous personality. In Athens, they sought to form cultivated souls, informed, subtle, full of measure and harmony, capable of enjoying beauty and the joys of pure speculation; in Rome, they wanted above all for children to become men of action, devoted to military glory, indifferent to letters and the arts. In the Middle Ages, education was above all Christian; in the Renaissance it assumes a more lay and literary character; today science tends to assume the place in education formerly occupied by the arts. (Durkheim 1956, 64)

In the United States, this sociological and comparative perspective has been markedly enriched by work on the nature and functioning of American education by institutional historians such as Bowles and Gintis (1976), Brint and Karabel (1989), Callahan (1962), Kaestle and Vinvoskis (1980), Katz (1968), Katznelson and Weir (1985), Lagemann-Condcliff (2000), Tyack (1974), Tyack, James, and Benevot (1987), and Ravitch (1974), to name a few. Tyack (1974) showed how many American educators believed the march of

history was leading (through various fits and starts) to the unrivaled triumph of today's education system—a heavily bureaucratized “one best system” of state-supplied schooling, complete with an all-powerful and highly professionalized administration.

Starting in the 1970s, however, this older tradition of institutional analysis received strong innovative impulses from organizational scholars at Stanford who noted that educational organizations did not seem to conform to key tenets of organizational theory. For example, while bureaucratic hierarchies are almost always assumed to be held together by tight relations between top and bottom levels, scholars from the Stanford school found in the late 1970s that higher and lower levels of hierarchy in schools and colleges often were “loosely coupled” (Meyer and Rowan 1978, Weick 1976, March 1980). Moreover, where organization theory predicted that these loosely integrated organizations would be unstable, loosely coupled educational hierarchies in fact proved remarkably stable over long periods of time. Finally, although organization theorists at the time saw the structure of organizations as strongly determined by conditions in the technical core, the Stanford theorists noted that the links between the technical core of educational institutions—teaching and learning in classrooms—and the formal structure of schools seemed highly tenuous.

The key to explaining these anomalies was to view educational organizations as institutionalized organizations, that is, as organizations whose most important constraint was not efficiency but rather legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Meyer 1977; Meyer and Scott 1983; March 1980). Organizations such as schools and colleges, the Stanford argument went, are held together more by shared beliefs—“myths”—than by technical exigencies or a logic of efficiency. Thus, the key constraint for educational institutions in this view is the need to maintain the trust and confidence of the public at large—in short, to maintain legitimacy by conforming to institutionalized norms, values, and technical lore.

#### WHAT IS THE NEW INSTITUTIONALISM?

The arguments just reviewed are often seen as constituting the new institutionalism in the field of education. But as Rowan (1995) and Rowan and Miskel (1999, 359) point out, during the 1990s there was a renaissance of institutional scholarship in the social sciences generally. An important feature of this renaissance was that it encouraged researchers across the social sciences to move beyond the narrow confines of their specialized expertise in order to explore a common set of theoretical concepts and ideas about the structure and operations of major societal sectors in nations around the world. Though diverse and sometimes inconsistent in their goals and assumptions, these

researchers shared a number of ideas that distinguished their approach to institutional analysis from more traditional (or “older”) forms of institutional scholarship.

This book takes up three important themes that mark the difference between this newer institutionalism and the older forms of institutional analysis it seeks to replace. In the following sections we discuss these themes briefly and signal to the reader the chapters in this book that develop these themes in the context of education.

### *Cognition and the Social Construction of Institutions*

Much of the “older” institutional analysis was focused on formal legal structures as they developed over long historic periods. This type of institutional analysis tended to view institutions as objective structures that exist independent of human action. The new institutionalism, by contrast, sees man-made rules and procedures as the basic building blocks of institutions. In this view, institutions gain an independent existence “out there” by being socially constructed “in here”—that is, in the minds of individual actors who have a stake in them. Before institutions can gain authority as objective social structures they must be endowed with meaning by cognitive acts of individuals. New institutionalists locate the origin of institutions in taken-for-granted classifications, scripts, and schemata that humans use to make sense of a disorderly world. “Compliance occurs in many circumstances because other types of behavior are inconceivable; routines are followed because they are taken for granted as the way we do these things. Institutions are thus repositories of taken-for-granted cognitive schemata that shape people’s understandings of the world they live in and provide scripts to guide their action. The emphasis in the new institutionalism, then, is on how people actively construct meaning within institutionalized settings through language and other symbolic representations.

Several chapters in this volume emphasize the role that shared beliefs and cognitions play in institution building. Ramirez, for example, discusses the role that an evolving conception of the “modern” university is playing in shaping higher educational institutions worldwide. He describes how this cognitive schema has been shaped by the uniquely American image of the modern university and how the global diffusion of this variant of higher education often comes into conflict with local traditions of culture, language, and a uniquely national narrative of “our” university system. Ramirez argues that the relative strength of national versus global models of education in the evolution of higher education differs across nations. In nations with weak indigenous academic traditions, the global pressures to rally around a singular “world” model of universities are felt more strongly than in countries that have long academic histories of their own.

Interestingly, Ramirez' attention to a dominant "world" model of higher education stands in marked contrast to Levy's discussion (in this volume) of the tendency in many nations around the world toward diversity in higher education. In fact, Levy presents considerable evidence that divergent forms of higher education are emerging all over the world, largely in the private education sector, and that many of these forms are sharply at odds with the established university models in these nations. Levy's chapter thus questions a central tenet of early institutional theory—the notion that educational forms will tend toward structural isomorphism.

H. D. Meyer looks at how shared beliefs and cognitive schemata have helped stabilize the conception of American public education as the common school. Noting that the widespread support for public education in the United States has depended to a large extent on the legitimacy of the common school ideal and the associated ideas that schools can level socioeconomic differences and bridge religious-moral divides, he argues that to the extent that the legitimacy of these ideas is waning, American's historic faith in the redemptive and equalizing role of public schooling will erode, too.

*Institutions, States, and Markets*

A second theme of the new institutionalism involves the changing ties among the polity, the economy, and civil society. In particular, the new institutionalists view economic markets as institutionally embedded and thus affected by institutionalized forms of property, security, modes of enforcing contracts that are developed by states and enacted in civil society. Depending on the specific institutional arrangements, the relative efficiency and distributional consequences of economic behavior may vary widely. Like traditional economic actors, the parties to economic transactions are seen as motivated by the potential costs and benefits of an exchange. But unlike rational choice notions of economic behavior, the new institutionalism does not see individuals as autonomous authors of their preferences. Rather, their preference formation takes place within the constraints of the "preferences" imposed by the institutional settings (Immergut 1998; Ingram and Clay 2000).

In this view, then, economic actors are not indifferent to the institutional arrangements (and the concomitant cost/benefit ratios) under which they barter. Therefore, they will bargain over not only a given exchange, but also over the institutional framework for their action. This makes bargaining, conflict and power ubiquitous facts in the world of institutions. It also leads to a view of institutional change as interest-based struggle that rational actors use to obtain favorable institutional arrangements. Self-interest is always constructed in the context of specific institutional and historical parameters. Rational actor models in the new institutionalism thus explicitly recognize the futility of trying to explain human behavior without reference to history,

tradition, culture, and idiosyncratic institutional configurations—all manner of social contexts that lend human behavior its characteristic complexity. As Powell (1991, 187) put it: “institutional processes help shape the very structure of economic arrangements.” The fact that institutional processes penetrate and shape economic relations further implies the obsolescence of the identification of “institutional with non-profit and technical with for-profit” (Powell and DiMaggio 1991, 33). Finally, when highly rationalized actions such as market transactions are seen as shaped by institutions, “the notion that institutional and technical imperatives are inconsistent” seems out of date (Powell and DiMaggio 1991, 32).

Several chapters in this volume take off from these insights about markets as institutions, about the ways in which governance and market forces combine in institutional affairs to produce unique pressures on educational organizations for both conformity and efficiency, and about the deeply institutionalized nature of even the most rational of actions. The tightening control of government over the core technology of schooling inevitably invites a discussion about the emergence of market supply of education in K–12 and higher education sectors around the world. Institutional theories of the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Meyer and Rowan 1978) largely ignored this problem, but discussions of education “markets” now seem central to education reform, not only in the United States, but in many other nations of the world as well. Indeed public attention to marketlike forms of education is growing, as shown in the United States by the growth of charter schools, voucher schemes, privately managed school systems, home schooling, and so on.

Three chapters in this book examine this problem through the lens of institutional theory. One is Levy’s analysis of growth in private-sector higher education; another is Davies, Quirke, and Aurin’s chapter on the structure and operations of private K–12 education in Toronto, Canada. Both chapters ask whether education markets work against the trend toward structural isomorphism that early institutional theorists saw as a central trend of educational organization in the modern world. The authors find that, under certain conditions, markets do indeed appear to produce more diverse forms of educational organization than institutional theory heretofore predicted. Finally, Bernasconi’s study of higher education reform in Chile (chapter 11) focuses on a case in which a government effectively broke the mold of government-controlled higher education by introducing market-based reforms. He shows that as market ideologies penetrated Chilean society during the Pinochet era, the Chilean government introduced a performance measurement system into higher education that opened this system up to increased competitiveness and entrepreneurialism.

The expanding reach of institutionalized markets also becomes obvious in the chapters by Rowan and Baker. Brian Rowan (in both his chapters in this volume) calls attention to the fact that a variety of organizations serve as key



actors in the larger institutional environment of education—including for-profit organizations such as textbook manufacturers, nonprofit research and advocacy groups, trades unions, and so on. Similarly, David Baker’s chapter in this volume points to the growing complexity of forces shaping education in modern societies, including parental pressures that are apparently giving rise to an entire “shadow education” system of private organizations that seems to be emerging alongside the usual state-sponsored, mass education system.

Other chapters in this volume address the relation between institutional and technical imperatives. Rowan (chapter 2), for example, shows how government regulations targeting the institutionalization of new accountability schemes have real effects on the inner (“technical”) workings of schools. Spillane and Burch also look at this issue and demonstrate that government controls can take on different forms, especially in the regulation of different subject areas within the school curriculum. Their analysis suggests that math and language arts instruction in schools tend to be far more tightly coupled to government policy than science or history instruction. Together, these analyses suggest a need to revisit one of the master themes in institutional analyses of schooling—the argument that institutional controls necessarily lead to loose coupling and “nonrational” action in education systems.

### *History, Power, and Change*

A final theme in the new institutionalism is the notion that we need to pay more attention to the concrete historical actors who built a particular institution. These actors are motivated by self-interest, but also by their values and cultural beliefs, which arise in a context of existing institutions. Whereas older forms of institutional analysis built around simple descriptive data or guided by structural functionalism sometimes neglected issues of power and conflict in institution building, new institutionalists try to address “head on issues of change, power, and efficiency” (DiMaggio and Powell 1991, 27). They “place interests and power on the institutional agenda” and “deepen the conversation about the form that a theory of institutional change might take” (ibid.). Institutionalists make no assumption that institutional arrangements garnering the support of the most powerful coalitions necessarily produce the most efficient institutional arrangements. In fact, dominant coalitions may precisely act to delay or prevent institutional change toward more optimal solutions. This also means that institutional change will often require political change—a redistribution of power that issues in greater societal emphasis on heretofore neglected or suppressed ideas and the groups that hold them.

Whereas older forms of institutional theory were satisfied with giving descriptive accounts of institutional change, the new institutionalism aspires to greater levels of analytical precision. At present, the most frequently invoked model of institutional change relies on notions of institutional equilibrium that

can be upset by “exogenous shocks” that disrupt existing institutional equilibriums, or by internal contradictions in existing institutional logics. As actors confront these conditions, historical institutionalism locates many different mechanisms that structure institutional change, including not only interest-based conflict and power struggles but also mechanisms of social learning and experimentation. As these mechanisms of change unfold, the emphasis in historical institutionalism is on how existing institutional arrangements both exclude actions from the “feasible set” of proposed changes and how these arrangements facilitate or enable particular new actions. Institutional arrangements are seen as path dependent, that is, emerging as a result of preexisting institutional formations and the affordances and constraints provided therein.

Several chapters in this volume examine issues of power and change in the process of institutional change. The chapter by Charles Bidwell, for example, argues that to understand institutional change in education, we have to understand the role of power in society. As Bidwell sees it, issues of power and conflict have been largely absent from many newer institutional theories of education, particularly versions of institutional theory that emphasize the stable and consensual nature of educational institutions and the ways in which this stimulates isomorphism within organizational fields. Bidwell’s emphasis on the centrality of power in institutional analysis does not negate a view of institutions as forces of order and stability in society, but it does call attention to how such stable and orderly institutions are built in the first place. His account of the creation of the University of Paris is a fascinating illustration of the political dimension of institution building.

H. D. Meyer’s study of the emergence and decline of the myth of the common school also deals with power in American public education. Meyer argues that the common school ideal was created in American society by an idiosyncratic coalition of New England patricians and urban reformers who united for a brief historical moment to avoid civil unrest and instability in the days of mass immigration. A slightly different course of history might not have resulted in the formation of this unlikely coalition of aristocratic patricians and idealistic urban reformers. Moreover, his comparison of the common school ideal to the German educational master-myth of *Bildung* underscores the distinctiveness of the common school myth.

#### LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The empirical trends documented in this book suggest a complex picture of increasing institutional diversity and of conflicting trends that defy easy categorization. The chapters describe the strong growth of decentralized, private-sector education around the world, which—in the United States at least—stands opposite a growing government capacity to manage and control

established educational organizations. While the growth of private education—both full-time and auxiliary (tutoring)—is giving a degree of control and choice back to the parents and students who can afford it, it may also signal new educational inequality in the form of unequal power to purchase private educational services. The partial retreat of the state, which harbors the possibility for a growing plurality of independent providers, has also eased the emergence of corporate giants in the field of education, especially firms that control textbook, test, and educational media production. Just as the call for accountability became the leading mantra of education reform, the private interests directing the mammoth corporations are not accountable to the public but only to their shareholders. This concentration of power over the minds of the young in the hands of a small group of corporate investors not only makes the government call for accountability sound hollow. It may also counteract the increase in individual autonomy and choice that otherwise might result from the partial retreat of the state and the growth of education markets.

While it is too early to declare any of these emerging trends as settled reality, neither is it likely that the chain of these ongoing changes will lead back to the status quo ante. In this volatile situation, the new institutionalism has a unique contribution to make in analyzing complex and contradictory patterns of institutional change. By casting a wider net to capture developments outside of, yet influential for, the educational arena proper, by comparing developments in different societies, and by fresh efforts to fit institutional theory to new conditions and circumstances, we believe institutional analysis can continue to make exciting and useful contributions to understanding the changes in an important part of our institutional fabric.

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