

Unplugged - My Own Book Review

W. Richard SCOTT (1995), *Institutions and Organizations. Ideas, Interests and Identities.*

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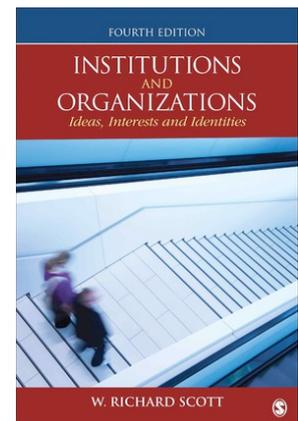
reviewed by himself

The “unplugged” section seeks to experience new forms of book reviews. We regularly grant a wild card to a world-class scholar to review his/her own Classic. In “My own book review”, authors will tell us the story of “what I was trying to do” with sometimes some auto-ethnographic considerations. By recounting the building process of one seminal research with a contemporary lens, they may give some insights for the current craft of research and also share with us renunciations, doubts and joys in their intimate writing experience.

THREE TEXTS

Institutions and Organizations is the third text book I have written. The first I co-authored with Peter M. Blau many years ago—an early organization text, *Formal Organization: A Comparative Approach*, first published in 1962. I was Blau’s student from 1956-1961 at the University of Chicago and I owe him an enormous debt for inviting me to participate with him in co-authoring one of the “founding texts” of the fledging field of organization studies. I have recounted elsewhere (Scott, 2003) my views on the intellectual context of the time and the collaborative process that produced the book, and I have commented briefly on its intended contributions. But, for me, the lasting impact of the experience was recognizing that authoring a more generalized and programmatic text had the potential to exert a profound impact on the development of an academic field—defining its boundaries, specifying central premises, and identifying its future agenda. Talk about creating cultural capital!

My second text was *Organizations: Rational, Natural and Open Systems*, first published in 1981. It was the product of teaching an “advanced-introductory” course on organizations to upper-level undergraduates and beginning graduate students at Stanford from 1960 to 1981—and beyond. In my mind, the defining factor that distinguished this text from others available at the time—e.g., Aldrich, 1979, Etzioni, 1961; Hall, 1972; Perrow, 1979—was my insistence that the arrival of the “open system” perspective during the late 1950s had fundamentally altered the field of organization studies. In their earlier book, the social psychologists Katz and Kahn (1966) had covered many of the insights associated with this conceptual framework, but they had not, in my view, adequately described its impact on macro or more sociological approaches. For a volume edited by Marshall Meyer, I wrote an introductory essay to a collection of articles dealing with changing perspectives on organization structure. In my essay, I first offered my suggestion that, after its emergence, the open systems perspective collided and interacted with the two reigning conceptual frameworks: the “rational” and “natural systems” models (Scott, 1978). I proposed that as open system models arrived, they evoked varying reactions—accommodations and revisions—as the



two dominant perspectives, formed under closed system assumptions, attempted to learn from and adapt to the open systems revolution. I then traced these theoretical ripples through the literature. In addition to identifying shifts in underlying theoretical perspectives, I also emphasized the expanding levels of analysis employed by organization scholars as they moved from more “micro” (within organization) structures and processes to those operating at the organization set, organization population, and organization field levels. The “before” and “after” transformations associated with the introduction of open systems models, together with shifts in the level of analysis, were utilized to organize my review of the extant literature—through six editions of this work (Scott 1981/1987/1992/1998/2003; Scott and Davis, 2007).

My assignment for this review essay is to focus on the third text—*Institutions and Organizations*—now in its 4th edition, (2013), but I must begin by pointing out continuities between this and my previous texts. In all three, I have attempted to exploit the opportunity afforded by the tutorial text-book format to sketch out the central issues defining the subject area and to delineate the boundaries of the intellectual territory claimed. All three have also emphasized the expanding levels of analysis which, I believe, have characterized organization studies from the early 1950s to the present. Particularly in the latter two texts, I have attempted to identify the foundational assumptions and to expose the various underlying conceptual dimensions that have created the critical fault-lines around which the field of study has been defined.

ORIGINS OF INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

As described in an earlier essay (Scott 2005), my exposure to and flirtation with institutional theory goes back to my early graduate work at the University of Chicago, which included courses from Everett C. Hughes. In my dissertation, I contrasted the differing orientations—today I would use the term “institutional logics”—that characterized administrators and professional social workers in a public agency (e.g., Scott, 1965). In later research on authority systems with Sanford Dornbusch (Dornbusch and Scott, 1975), we examined the differences between workers and managers in their conceptions of employee tasks and in their preferences for authority systems. We concluded that work arrangements do not follow some natural economic law regarding efficient organization but are shaped by cultural, social and political processes.

However, it was not until my collaboration with John W. Meyer, begun during the 1970s, that I began to recognize the broader ways in which institutional forces shape organizational arrangements. Our studies of the organization of work in elementary and secondary classrooms revealed that they were not highly responsive to differences in the complexity of work performed, as predicted by contingency theory—the reigning theory at the time (see Scott, 1983). In a series of studies extending into the 1990s, we explored the ways in which not only the “task” but the “institutional” environment—the wider cultural framework—shaped how formal organizations were structured around work systems. John and I, working with multiple colleagues and students, continued our collaboration for more than two decades, refining our theoretical arguments and conducting research to evaluate our predictions.

In 1989, I was invited to become a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. This year-long fellowship allowed me to devote full attention to my scholarship, as opposed to teaching and administrative duties. Rather than using the year to write articles or complete a book manuscript, as was customary for fellows, I spent virtually all of my time immersing myself in the

extensive institutional literature, which extended not only over time but across several disciplines, in particular, anthropology, economics, political science, and sociology. (The Center contained a talented and responsive library staff who could retrieve virtually any book or article, usually overnight.) In conducting this review, I became aware that most if not all of the differences observed concern the nature of the arguments made about why it is that actors—individual or collective—comply with rules and prescriptions: is it because they are rewarded for doing so, because they believe that they are morally obligated to do so, or because they are following their conception of what reasonable others would do in the situation? I labeled these differences “regulative”, “normative”, and “cultural-cognitive” and proposed that each was associated with different arguments or assumptions about the mechanisms activated, the logics employed by actors, the appropriate indicators, the type of affect or emotion generated, and the basis of legitimacy. I labeled my approach the “pillars” framework, each element providing a different support or foundation for an institutional order.

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF AND RESPONSES TO THE TEXT

In the first edition of *Institutions and Organizations* (1995), I began with a review of the rather chaotic literature of institutional theory, from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. I introduced the “pillars” framework as a means of sorting out the disparate assumptions and resulting arguments, and then employed it as a basis for reviewing developments, both theoretical and empirical, from the 1970s forward. I emphasized that the “new” institutionalism, beginning in the 1970s, was primarily due to renewed attention to the cultural-cognitive elements—regenerating a line of thought that can be traced through Durkheim, Schutz (1932/1967) Berger and Luckmann (1967), the ethnomethodologists (e.g., Garfinkel (1967) to Meyer and Rowan (1977) and Zucker (1977). As I noted in the text, I devoted more time and attention to this third “pillar” because it was the most novel and least well known.

My proposed approach was attacked in reviews by some who charged that my approach advocated a “force-choice” selection of one element over another (Hirsch, 1997: 1704), even though from the time I first proposed the framework, I insisted that the elements were intended as “analytic”—conceptual tools to enable investigators to identify what ingredients were at work in varying situations while acknowledging that the elements were often combined together—especially in robust institutions. I also pointed out that the elements in play could change over time, for example, institutional frameworks that employed primarily regulative elements in their origins might over time operate more as normative and cultural-cognitive systems.

Some sociologists also objected to the inclusion of a regulative system relying on sanctions since for them, this conflated arguments based on resource-dependence with those relying on the power of “social facts”—e.g., taken-for-granted assumptions or cognitive frames (see, e.g., Phillips and Malhotra, 2008; Zucker, 1991: 104). I agree that sanctions are different from “social facts”. Indeed, that is the point of the “pillars” framework. However, to ignore systems that depend for their operation on rewards and penalties is to exclude most of the work by institutional economists and rational choice political scientists, who, more than sociologists or anthropologists, focus on the institutional processes operating in markets and states. Since I was interested in contrasting and comparing approaches, it seemed to me inappropriate to construct a conceptual framework that excluded many of the most influential institutional theories in use.

More generally, some critics have argued that the broad scope of “institutional studies” prevents it from developing into a coherent theory. For example, Palmer and colleagues (Palmer, Biggart & Dick, 2008: 754) “wonder whether some of the NI’s [new institutionalism’s] most penetrating insights are at risk of being lost as it expands to incorporate multiple disciplines, operate at multiple levels of analysis, and address a cornucopia of substantive topics”. There is indeed a danger in trying to “explain everything”. However, because institutional theory addresses the core topics of social order and social change it is not easy to arbitrarily exclude the wide range of substantive topics and levels caught up in these processes. Our task is to attempt to identify the core elements, processes and mechanisms at work across myriad arenas.

Finally, I want to point out the importance of revised editions of texts. I must confess that I find myself annoyed by the fact that so many scholars continue to rely on and cite one of the previous editions (whether the 1995, the 2001 or the 2008 edition), although I fully understand why this is the case. Most of us refer to the edition of a work as we first encounter it (and I myself am guilty of this intellectual laziness). And, admittedly, some authors do not make extensive changes from one edition to another (I think I am an exception to this: my own revised editions are made up of twenty-five to thirty percent new material). I note three reasons why we all should endeavor to consult the most recent edition of a work.

First, in intellectually vigorous and rapidly expanding fields, such as institutional theory, one can observe the sharpening of arguments, the expansion of the number of issues to which ideas are applied, and improvement in the indicators and methods employed. A rough comparison of the number of references to relevant theoretical and empirical articles and books in the first edition of *Institutions and Organizations* and the most recent (1995; 2013) reveals almost a doubling of references—from around 580 to over 1000 citations. Scholars stand to benefit by informing themselves about the most recent work.

Second, more recent work can challenge and revise earlier work as well as merely contribute to it. For example, one of the most important changes in institutional theory over the past two decades has been the shift in emphasis from a focus on structure to a greater attention to actors and action. Presumptions of automatic conformity to institutional pressures have been challenged by work that stresses strategic and disruptive behavior (e.g., Oliver, 1991; Davis et al., 2005). Arguments concerning top-down pressures and constraining forces have been joined by ones stressing bottom-up initiatives and mindful adaptations (e.g., DiMaggio 1988; Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003), as well as others that focus on institutional “work” rather than institutional structure (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2008). Nevertheless, many scholars, who continue to rely on earlier work including the earlier texts, persist in complaining that institutional theory is primarily concerned with top-down constraints and governed by determinative assumptions.

Third, authoring multiple editions of a text allows an author to learn from, take into account, and make revisions to his/her ideas because of reader response to earlier versions. These responses take many forms, including formal book reviews, but also references to one’s work in articles contained in review journals or handbooks. (In passing, I would note that later editions of a book are hardly ever subjected to formal reviews in professional journals.) Feedback is also received from scholars who employ the original arguments but proceed, on the basis of their own findings and interpretations, to raise questions about or suggest revisions to earlier formulations. Living in the age of electronic media, I have received large numbers of responses to my work via e-mail, some in the form of questions for clarification, others in the mode of offering criticism and suggesting modifications. These regularly come from scholars of all ages and from all parts of the globe. All of these responses, as well as other opportunities

for learning from the reactions of others, reinforce my view that science at its best is conducted within an open architecture: it is the collective product of individuals sharing a common tradition and focusing on the same or similar questions.

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