

## **Institutional Theory:**

### **Taking Stock and Re-Tooling**

**Gili S. Drori, Renate E. Meyer, and Tammar B. Zilber**

Since its development in the late 1970s, institutional theory has become a dominant approach for the study of organizations and organizing and took to the title of new institutionalism. Indeed, even though anchored in “old” institutionalism (Selznick, 1949; Clark, 1970), the early provocative claims of new institutionalists (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Zucker, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) regarding embeddedness and relations with the environment as well as the explanatory power of legitimacy and of rationalization have become axioms for many strands in organizational analysis. From this solid base grew a variety of theoretical foci: comparative and global tradition of world society theory (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, and Ramirez, 1997), diffusion (Strang and Meyer, 1993), translation, (Czarniawska and Sevon, 1996), institutional logics (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury, 2012), and institutional work (Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca, 2009). These were accompanied by a whole host of concepts to describe institutional processes at the organization and field levels, including loose coupling (Weick, 1976; Bromley and Powell, 2012), attribution of agency to actors (Garud, Hardy and Maguire, 2007), network analysis (Powell, White, Kogut and Owen-Smith, 2005), field configurations (Strang and Sine, 2002) and emergence (Padgett and Powell, 2012).

Given the multiplicity of theoretical and methodological approaches and interests, institutional theory is best described as a very large tent approach more than a specific set of theoretical claims. This canopy extends across the great expanse between streams of agency and social movement to phenomenological definitions of actorhood (see, Meyer and Jepperson, 2000; Schneiberg and Soule, 2005; for review, Hwang and Colyvas, 2011) or across the expanse between the study of micro-foundations and ethnographies (e.g., Powell and Rerup, 2016; Hallett, 2010; Zilber, 2016), on the one hand, and of meta-organizations and glocal organization, on the other hand (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011; Drori, Höllerer, and Walgenbach, 2014). It extends across different levels of analysis and across different semiotic modes (Meyer, Höller, Jancsary, and van Leeuwen, 2013).

What does this multiplicity and diversity of institutionalist approaches mean for future elaboration of institutional theory? What directions are most fruitful for future work in institutional analysis – conceptual, empirical and methodological? The goal of this proposed sub-theme discussion is to propose, consider, assess, and mark such pathways. Although several recent volumes were devoted to “taking stock” of institutional theory (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin and Suddaby, 2008), some scholars have been very critical of lost focus and thematic coherence (e.g., Greenwood, Hinings and Whetten, 2014; Meyer and Höllerer, 2014; Davis, 2015). We aim to further engage in meta-theoretical conversation that would not only identify the potential of specific institutionalist schools but also consider the state of institutional theory as a whole and possibilities for its research programs.

We contend that much room remains for further discussions of the possibilities for re-tooling institutional theory and for identification of particular pathways for future research. Overall, we intend for discussions to wrestle anew with the epistemology of institutionalization across various social levels, sectors, and regions and locales and to the ontology of institutions in relation to the place that identity and materiality, as both constructs and processes, take in institutions.

We therefore welcome papers that offer new methods of institutional analysis, as well as papers that provide fresh insights for classic formulations. We invite colleagues to contribute to this discussion with essays and research that offer a vision of the conceptual, empirical and methodological trajectories of institutional theory.

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