World Society: A Theory and a Research Program in Context

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In explaining the dynamics of world society, John W. Meyer often elaborates on what he calls “hypothetical worlds,” namely, the alternative social orders that might have emerged from the dominance of European powers and the intellectual breakthroughs in religion, science, and politics of the Enlightenment era and the nineteenth century. The description of such alternative world orders offers a glimpse into the possible historical routes, each describing a counterfactual historical trajectory, not to say destiny, for the West and the world. This contemplation of “worlds that might have been” makes possible and directly useful reflections on the “world that is” and on the forces that came to shape it. Meyer’s “reflections” on world history, as much as they draw from and comment on the study of specific sectors or institutions, provide a comprehensive explanation of the history of world society: describing patterns (such as structuration and globalization), detailing particular processes (such as the institutionalization of personhood and education), and pointing to causal mechanisms (such as international organizations and the professions). These historical accounts form the basis for provocative and counter-intuitive theoretical claims about how institutional forces of culture and legitimacy play key roles in sweeping social change and also its companion, local and global inertia of varied kinds. These chronicles of Western, now globalized, society combine into a sustained theoretical research program: a broad-ranging sociological theory of modernity in dialogue with, and generative for, a prolific body of empirical studies. Together, these studies by Meyer and his collaborators compose an integrated scholarship of world affairs, that is known as “world society theory,” and that this book profiles in full form and detail for the first time.

Meyer is the central figure in this research tradition of world society theory, whose work marks the principal pieces of this body of argument, evidence, and theory. In this book, we “put the pieces” of this story together, to recognize and celebrate Meyer’s contribution to sociology. The contribution extends beyond these studies of world society, and we note this with accounts of his breakthrough scholarship in institutional theory and his application of institutionalist methods and arguments to the wide variety of social institutions, issues, and processes. With Meyer offering his most recent articulation of these ideas and key theoretical matters in Chapter 2, this chapter
sociological explanations of education and socialization. Indeed, world society work gradually matured intellectually through his efforts and the wider conversations that the early work provoked among colleagues, students, and several specialty fields across the social sciences. From his initial writings in the 1970s on particular institutions (Meyer 1977), organizations (Chapter 4), and cross-national processes (Meyer and Hannan 1979) through a series of comprehensive declarations of the theoretical stand (in particular, Meyer and Hannan 1979; Thomas et al. 1987; Meyer and Scott 1992; Scott and Meyer 1994; Meyer et al. 1997 [Chapter 8]) to more recent statements (Meyer et al. 2006), the work by Meyer and his colleagues consistently elaborates a distinctively institutionalist (and later neo-institutionalist; Powell and DiMaggio 1991) sensibility and stance that is profoundly sociological as well.

The breadth of these conceptual claims and the span of the social institutions to which these concepts came to be applied led Meyer and his collaborators to continuously engage in a conversation with the then current social science theories. Such conversations, even if used for the purpose of highlighting the important distinctions among the worldviews, suggest strong intellectual connections between Meyer's scholarship and current social thought. The following section centers on such connections, elaborating on shared ideas, terminology, and subjects of study.

CONNECTIONS

The stature of Meyer's scholarship comes from the challenge that it poses to rational, or realist, approaches in the social sciences. Meyer's novel work of the 1970s challenged the dominant sociological theories of the day. On issues as central to sociological thinking as socialization, Meyer called for a reconsideration of the interplay between norms and social roles. Rather than seeing norms as being internalized by individuals (as is the image in Parsons' and Merton's sociology), Meyer's phenomenological turn proposed viewing culture as outlining shared expectations codified into or constructed as models of how the world operates. And rather than being socialized into their social roles through social institutions—primarily education but also medicine, science, and religion—Meyer shifted the discussion to the mythologies carried by such institutions and to the ritualized nature of compliance with social expectations. In several seminal pieces from the 1970s (Chapter 4; Meyer 1977), Meyer breaks with American sociological thinking of the day and embraces the constructivist tone of phenomenology, primarily Berger and Luckmann's (1967) work (see Meyer 1992).

At the same time, Meyer's work then and now are thoroughly sociological, interpreting the main subject matters that concern many social scientists. Meyer's work analyzes a variety of social institutions that are the subject of study in all social science disciplines: from the state to the firm, from education to law, from the individual citizen to globalization, from social power to human rights. In the discussion of such substantive matters, there emerges a dialogue, even if contrarian at times, with a variety of social science schools of thought.
In this section, we discuss the intellectual connections between Mayer's scholarship and these various schools. We locate points of junction among them, on substantive and conceptual grounds, by identifying common concepts (such as diffusion or the social act) or a shared interest in a particular social institution (such as education, science, and rights). The guiding questions of our review are (a) What are the points of connection between Mayer's work and other social science discussions? (b) How have Mayer and others influenced each other's work? This section samples some of the central connections between the world society theory and other intellectual endeavors or scholarly discussions, thus raising particular agendas as bridges across disciplinary or substantive subjects of study.

We organize the section by four fields of study: (a) organization studies and management; (b) political science and international relations; (c) social theory; and (d) globalization. Because the foundational concepts of world society theory, mentioned earlier, are used to interpret issues in all four scholarly fields, each discussion is organized around a specific concept or idea. In other words, we use the discussion of the connection between Mayer's work and each field of study as a lever for an elaboration of specific concepts or ideas that create obvious connections among them and to draw connections and distinctions among the theoretical approaches. Specifically, (a) we discuss the open system approach and ideas of embeddedness and rationalization to accentuate the connection between Mayer's work and the field of organization studies and management; (b) we use the discussion of the state and its related institutions to anchor the connection between Mayer's work and the field of political science and international relations; (c) we use the concepts of the social system, the social actor, and governmentality to draw connections with the field of social theory; and (d) we use the ideas about diffusion and macroanalysis to draw connections with the study of globalization. In line with recent calls to bridge across disciplinary divides (for example, Pevern and Wendt 2002; Tempel and Wagemaker 2007), we see the overall mission of this chapter as building bridges across scholarly discussions and as seeking conversations among academic disciplines.

Organization studies and management

Challenging the then common assumptions about the rationality of organizations, Mayer was central to the 1970s revolution in organizational studies. The dominant theories of the day regarded the organizations as rational, bounded, and autonomous entities: organizations, even when considered within the context of their environment, were regarded as "closed systems" and as deliberative decision makers. Then, with two influential pieces both of which were published in 1977 (Chapter 4; Mayer 1977), Mayer became pivotal in turning the field of organization studies on its head.

In his work on education (Mayer 1977), Mayer called for a focus on institutions rather than on specific social systems or organizations. Moreover, in this piece Mayer reorients the sociological understanding of education to carry a socialization function: more than teaching norms and more than changing the life of those educated in the system, education constructs social roles and identities, often through certification. In this way, education has a diffuse rather than direct impact on society because
people learn the social myths (Jepperson 2002, particularly pages 231–3). This piece charted the path for institutionalist work on education (Kamens 1977; Meyer et al. 1978; Meyer et al. 1981), elaborating on, for example, the idea of the person. Still, education is not seen in this and in later work as a case study; rather, education is viewed as a key social institution. For that reason, this piece was also quickly followed by other institutionalist writings (Zucker 1977; Meyer and Scott 1983; DiMaggio and Powell 1983) that more generally laid the foundations for this tradition.

Even more influential was the article “Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony,” written with Brian Rowan (Chapter 4, originally published in 1977). This piece is among the most cited papers in organizational institutionalism (Greenwood et al. 2008: 2). Meyer and Rowan’s analysis is guided by the question why organizations develop ever-more elaborate formal-rational structures (such as organizational charts, formal communication systems, accounting and bookkeeping procedures, and detailed descriptions of positions and organizational units). This question obviously goes back to Max Weber (1968) and his early description of bureaucratic organizations. According to Meyer and Rowan, in the prevailing rationalist technological paradigm in organization studies of the mid 1970s, Weber’s emphasis on the legitimacy of formal structures is left out. Instead, the rational approach regards formal rational structures as reflecting complex coordination tasks in organizations, as their function is to maximize efficiency. Meyer and Rowan challenge this basic assumption. According to them, the development of formal rational structures is driven not by the pursuit for efficiency but rather by the pursuit for legitimacy from the environment in which organizations are embedded. Formal structures, therefore, are not and foremost outward-oriented, with organizations influenced primarily by their institutional context. On this point, Meyer and Rowan again extend Weber’s work. According to Meyer and Rowan, formal organizational structures hardly steer the organization’s activities; rather, they are mainly display windows toward the environment, and are only loosely coupled to what they call the activity structure of an organization. Also, formal organizational structures do not reflect technological imperatives (Lawrence and Lorsch 1967; Thompson 1967/2003) or resource dependencies (Pfeffer 1972; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978); they reflect “the rules, norms and ideologies of the wider society” (Meyer and Rowan 1977: 84), the rationalized myths, and the taken-for-granted notions. In these ways, Meyer and Rowan’s work is influential because of the relations it posed with sociological thought: engaging Weberian canon but challenging rational interpretations of Weber.

Meyer and Rowan’s work is particularly influential because of the impact it had on the field of organizational studies. By emphasizing that formal structures adapt easily and often ritualistically to changing environmental conditions and that such adaptation leads to structural similarities between the organization and its environment, Meyer and Rowan’s work charted a path to DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) renowned work on isomorphism. And in spite of Meyer’s (2008) recent emphasis that DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) notion of mimetic isomorphism is conceptually distinct from coercive or normative mechanisms of isomorphism because it offers a constructivist image of the social actor, the strong conceptual link between these seminal
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neoinstitutional pieces is abundantly clear. Moreover, in his recent writing (2008), Meyer strengthens the connection between Meyer and Rowan (1977) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983) by yet again highlighting the cognitive dimensions and emphasizing the centrality of the enactment in producing isomorphism.

Both early works by Meyer (Chapter 4; Meyer 1977) were crucial in establishing a radical societal perspective on organizations that put (a) organizations in the context of their environment and (b) societal legitimacy at the center of social processes. These ideas became the trademarks for new institutionalism in organizational analysis (Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Scott 2004, 2008; Greenwood et al. 2008). And although early institutional work by Meyer and others focused on public sector institutions (e.g., Dobbins et al. 1988; Edelman 1990; Dobbins 1992, 1994), recently organization and management studies have increasingly used these early neoinstitutional concepts for the analysis of organizational behavior in the corporate sector. So while Powell (1991: 183) self-critically states that “much of the empirical research thus far has focused on nonprofit organizations and public agencies (schools, the mental health sector, health care, cultural institutions, etc.),” neoinstitutional concepts of legitimacy, institutional context, and isomorphism are used to describe processes in the for-profit sector too: the spread of the multidivisional form among large American corporations (Fleishman 1985), the establishment of investor relations departments in business firms (Rao and Sivakumar 1999), the adoption of quality management systems in German industry (Beck and Walgenbach 2005), and the symbolic management of strategic change among firms (Fiss and Zajac 2004). This development reflects the dramatic extension of organizational institutionalism: in some circles of management studies, institutional theory has become the most commonly used theory (Davis 2006: 114–115).

Meyer’s foundational work in institutional thinking took place at a time of much theoretical innovation in organizational studies, particularly at Stanford University. Out of this intellectually vibrant environment came theories of organization as diverse as resource dependence, population ecology, and bounded rationality. Meyer’s collaboration with Michael Hannan (Meyer and Hannan 1979) established common ground for the exploration of organizational fields (and also coined the methodology and early arguments for Meyer’s subsequent and long focus on cross-national studies), and his work with W. Richard Scott (especially Meyer/Scott 1992, Scott/Meyer 1994) was particularly fruitful for the development of neoinstitutional theory and for the joint mentoring of several generations of scholars in this tradition.

Meyer’s theoretical breakthroughs directly relate to the general field of organizational studies and management in three distinct realms: (a) embeddedness, with the “open system” approach, (b) expansion and structuration, with the formal organization approach, and (c) rationalization, with the constructivist approach. These relations create partially overlapping spheres: Meyer’s work shared terminology or theoretical perspective with the three discussions, but the discussions only partially relate with each other. The relevance of Meyer’s work to these three main issues in organizational studies and management reveals the extent of influence of Meyer’s work: with shared ideas and concepts, Meyer’s work relates to and connects various issues, theories, and specialties in the rapidly growing field of organizational studies.
First, in its emphasis on embeddedness as a foundational concept, Meyer’s work is an obvious part of the “open system” approach, which regards organizations within the context of their relations with their environment. But whereas others describe the environment as primarily imposing technical requirements, transaction costs, or information-related imperatives (for example, contingency theory; Lawrence and Lorsch 1967), for Meyer the environment primarily consists of cultural models that are then enacted by embedded entities. The environment is, therefore, neither a Leviathan nor a market that imposes the logic of rational power. Rather, in Meyer’s work as for other institutionalists (Scott 2008), the environment essentially involves normative preferences and the power of legitimacy. Again following Weber (1968), the form of the organization itself is seen as a strong cultural model in modern society because it codifies the logic of means-end rationality and sets social roles as the basis for interpersonal relations. As such, the institutional context of organizations creates indirect influences on the organization embedded in it: Meyer borrows Berger’s (1968) idea of the “sacred canopy” to describe the diffuse and cultural influence of the institutional context. With that, organizations alter their form to reflect their relations with a rapidly changing institutional context. While for Weber the institutional context was primarily that of the large, centralised, hierarchical, and bureaucratic state, governance modes in the era following World War II are dramatically more diffuse. World society, which is built on the significant growth and legitimacy of international nongovernmental organizations, demonstrates the role of more cosmopolitan, egalitarian, and networked organizational actors (Chapters 7 and 8). By relying on Tocquevillian descriptions of authority, Meyer’s work connects with research on the looseness of social networks: with network arcs creating a “sacred canopy” of shared understandings, rather than direct relations of power and exchange, authority of the cultural scripts is enhanced. For Meyer, embeddedness in a network embodies the increasingly associational rather than hierarchical nature of organizational fields, and further enhances the importance of cultural models. Such cultural models, shared among presumably equivalent actors, breed further structuration.

Second, Meyer’s work is related to the formal organization approach through his study of expansion and structuration. Meyer’s definition of the environment of organizations as cultural and diffuse (rather than economic, political, and direct) does not diminish his interest in the formal side of organizations. Moreover, the irrationality of rationality, which is evident in isomorphic and loose-coupling tendencies of organizations, does not contradict the impulse toward formalization. Structuration, he argues, comes not from imperatives but from scripts. Without diminishing the importance of organizations in modern society, Meyer negates the assumptions by Charles Perrow (1991) and others who define the “society of organizations,” according to which organizations are the “independent variable” or the primary cause of societal development. For Meyer, organizations – like the individuals, a-la institutionalism – are the “dependent variable,” or outcome, of the societal norms and expectations in which they are embedded. This embeddedness explains the expansion, in numbers and in scope, of organizations over time; it is also related to changes in organizational formats. For Perrow, society is peopled by
organizations through which action occurs; for Meyer, society is formed by rationalization, which is expressed by and through formal organizations. Still, Meyer's focus on the formal is not a focus on structure alone: Meyer rejects the equating of formal structure with function (Chapter 4), and joins other institutionalists in seeing structure as an embodiment of meaning. In this sense, the structuration of organizational fields and the individual organizations therein is seen as conveying meanings of identity. Also, whereas organizations and meanings continuously change, Meyer's approach to social change is clear of modernization theory's normative tone. For example, the rapid expansion in numbers and scope of international organizations, particularly nongovernmental organizations, testifies to the institutionalization of a global society. Boli and Thomas (1997, 1999) sketch the nature of world society according to the thematic emphasis that organizational structuration marks. They show that the dominant global organizational field is economic, including trade and industry (see also Chubbott 1999), conveying the global cultural theme of progress (Chapters 3 and 8). Similarly, expressing the link between structure and meaning, the study of expansion and institutionalization trends is not specifically a matter of the life cycle of a field (in reference to population ecology literature; Hannan and Freeman 1977); rather, such structuration expresses the rise of a particular theme and thus reflects broader societal and organizational change. Several examples of this idea emerge in Meyer's work. For example, the nation-state, which is itself regarded as a formal organization (Chapter 7 and 8), tends to have a standardized set of ministries, and this format for ministerial duties reflects global policy trends, conveying the themes and policy emphases that are shared worldwide (Drori and Meyer 2007). In a similar vein, the rise of organizational work around governance conveys the alignment of management ideologies with the theme of participatory engagement or actorhood, which comes to be structured around procedures and the language of accountability and transparency (Drori 2006). This managerialist turn is particularly noticeable in education, where universities in very different countries, nowadays, have a fine-grained and differentiated structure with offices for a variety of tasks, which, like technology transfer, gender equality, and organizational development, previously were not regarded as part of the organization's responsibility (Krücken and Meier 2006; Ramirez 2006). Across these many examples—in the study of structuration of international organizations, firms, and public institutions—attention to the formal structure is complemented by attention to the meaning conveyed through formal structuration.

Third, in his work on rationalization, Meyer converses with the constructivist approach to organizational studies. As mentioned earlier, according to Meyer, the structuration of organizations and organizational fields, which is explained as increased formalization and structural elaboration, can hardly be equated with an increase of rational decision making. Rather, structuration is increasingly rationalized, or organized around means-ends logic in celebration of efficiency and credentialized expertise. In seeing organizational behavior not as driven by rational decision making, Meyer's work relates directly to the Carnegie School, and later articulation of the "garbage can model" of decision making (March and Olsen 1976). This work reveals how problems, solutions, and decision makers in organizations come to
be independent from each other, thus directly challenging all kinds of rational decision-making models (March 1999). March's heralding work on decision making opened up intellectual space for Meyer's ensuing institutional commentary: Meyer builds on March's microlevel analyses, and adds the institutional concern with the wider context of organizational behavior.

Continuing with this emphasis on the irrationality of rationality, Meyer's collaboration with W. Richard Scott produced a stream of research on public sector organizations (Meyer and Scott 1992; Scott and Meyer 1994). Their use of the idea of rationalization again harks back to Weber: The neoinstitutionalist definition of rationalization as a cultural force (rather than the application of mechanistic routines) echoes Weber's emphasis on the nature, or "spirit," of the related routines. In Weber's words, "In the last resort the factors that produced capitalism are the rational permanent enterprise, rational accounting, rational technology, and rational law, but again not these alone. Necessary complementary factors were the rational spirit, the rationalization of the conduct of life in general and a rationalistic economic ethic" (Weber 1961: 260). This constructivist perspective resonates with what is called "Scandinavian institutionalism" (Czarniawska 2008: 772). Nils Brunsson (1989; also Brunsson and Olsen 1993) emphasizes role making as a junction of rationalization where the traditional image of organizations whose rational, purposive actions are reversed and a world of standards emerges. Meyer's emphasis on diffuse cultural authority also resonates with Scandinavian ideas about "soft law," or voluntary schemes of compliance (Brunsson and Jacobsson 2000; Mönth 2006). And on the interpretative nature of the social construction of routines, Meyer's work on enactment and loose coupling relates to Weick's (1969, 1976) ideas of interlocked behavior and sense making. In general, Meyer's macrophenomenological approach to organizations emphasizes the socially constructed nature of these presumably rational entities and the related sense of agency (see Barley and Tolbert 1997). And although this conceptualization of the relationship between society and organizations is very much in line with Weber's original idea of rationalization, the consequences of such rationalization at the organizational level are seen differently. Instead of seeing organizations as the main symbol and driver of the "iron cage" – here relying on Parson's commonly used yet imprecise translation of Weber's (1920) original term stabilnates Gebäude – the coupling between societal and organizational processes is much looser as, according to Meyer, organizations enact scripts of rational agency and engage in ritualistic compliance in order to gain legitimacy from a society that came to value rationalized ideals.

Meyer's work, placed at the junction of these three themes in organizational studies – embeddedness, the formal organization, and rationalization – strongly emphasizes the role of the broader sociocultural environment as an explanatory variable for organization. This leaves room for various understandings of the carriers that are responsible for the diffusion of cultural models from the environment into the organization. In much of his work, Meyer points to the role of international organizations as diffusion agents (in particular, Chapter 8). But, as discussed in the section "Political science and international relations," international organizations are not necessarily explicit conduits of influence, surely not in a muscular way. Rather,
they serve as the embodiment of global cultural values of an increasingly rationalized society. Their role is, therefore, as carriers of world culture, which is heavily scientized (Chapter 12; Drori and Meyer 2006) and professionalized (Chapter 11). In emphasizing the importance of knowledge in shaping practices and structures, Meyer joins with the sociologists of science who focus on the long-term trend of the scientization of society (Weingart 2003), and with sociologists of the professions who focus on the rationalizing and standardizing power of the professions (Power 1997; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall 2002; Greenwood et al. 2006). In this way, Meyer's emphasis on the organizational context as primarily cultural and on the influence of such context as primarily diffuse, marks the phenomenological "pole" of institutional thinking in organizational studies. Meyer, who marked the emergence of this approach in the 1970s, stands this day in sharp contrast with the increasingly prevalent managerial and strategic institutionalist approach to organization (Meyer 2008; Chapter 2).

Political science and international relations

In keeping with the "open system" approach, Meyer came to treat the nation-state as an organization and to consider the nation-state as being shaped by its sociocultural environment. This approach puts Meyer's work in direct conversation with scholars from the disciplines of political science and international relations, who also consider states within the context of the international system. Still, because Meyer's work on organizations stems from criticizing rationality as the fundamental myth of organizational studies, his analyses of the state stand in contrast to the prevailing realism in political science and international relations. Here, Meyer criticizes the assumption that the state can be treated as a bounded and rational actor, which follows a distinct national trajectory and pursues singular distinct interests. His commentary on the political emerged from his sociological analysis of education and of formal organizations. As early as his 1970's analysis of education as an institution, he reflected on the role of policy as an institutionalized myth and developed the idea of the irrationality of rationality (Meyer 1977). This early commentary, which was initially directing its challenge at the literature on the state-sponsored institution of education, evolved into a comprehensive institutionalist statement about the nature of the modern nation-state. Much like his approach to formal organizations, Meyer's analysis of the state can be divided along the main features of the institution of the modern nation-state: (a) its embeddedness in a wider - international and increasingly global - environment, (b) the results of this embeddedness in the structures and processes that constitute the state, and (c) the social institutions (such as education, development, and rights) that come to be intertwined with the modern state. On all these matters, Meyer's work participates in the current debates in political science and international relations, while departing from their often realist theoretical stand and offering a distinctly neoinstitutional interpretation of the state.

First, like the discursive shift in organizational studies toward an "open system" approach, the nation-state too is increasingly seen within the context of its relations with other international players. This approach obviously gave rise to discussions on
globalization, which have come to define the international or global context as the taken-for-granted approach in the social sciences (what some call the globalization of globalization; also, Guillén 2001, and further discussion in the section “Globalization”). It also strengthened the tendencies toward comparative studies: state action and its patterns are analyzed in comparison with those in other states (even when the analysis takes little account of the influence by the international conditions or forces).

Here, the theorization of the nation-state and the related universalization and rationalization of this “category” reified the embeddedness of the state in its international and global environment.

With the growing recognition, across disciplinary and theoretical lines, of the rise of the global, the debate shifted to the nature of the global or transnational system, which serves as the important context for nation-states. Recognizing the increasing heterogeneity of global governance (with the addition of private and public, international and transnational players) and the increased power of international instruments (of law and commercial interests), the central debate of the 1990s centered on the future of the nation-state. The recognition that international organizations, multinational firms, and transnational civil organizations now join states in formulating policies was expressed in an anxious discussion about the withering of the modern nation-state (for example, Evans 1997). The surprise was that neither a world-state nor a simple interstate system has emerged; nor has the world plunged into anarchy (for example, Rosenau 1997, 2003; Wendt 1999: 308). These discussions, which were rooted in dichotomous imagery (setting order and sovereignty versus anarchy and the porousness of boundaries; Milner 1991), now speak in terms of forms of global authority and the role nation-states play in it. For realists, the discussion on global authority is one of management, specifically the governance of a global system (for example, Rosenau 1995); the issue is how to coordinate global affairs when the players are increasingly transnational and the network is increasingly heterogeneous (for example, Ottaway 2001; Hall and Biersteker 2002; Patteberg 2005). Meyer replies to these discussions with a constructivist rebuttal: world society, in which nation-states are increasingly embedded, is organized in a highly Tocquevillean manner (Chapter 8: 180; Meyer et al. 2006: 25), with authority being both diffuse and normative in nature. Like Tocqueville’s interpretation of social cohesion, world society is organized around cultural rules and associational networks rather than through centralized control. And whereas for some sociologists, embeddedness connotes the local roots of modern forms and thus explains cross-national variation (Evans 1995), for Meyer embeddedness connotes the relations of the nation-state with world society, conveys the influence of world society, and thus explains cross-national similarities. Second, the embeddedness of the nation-state in international and global networks results in profound changes to the practices, structures, and discourses of the state. Cross-nationally governments offer a similar range of social services (for example, mass education; Chapter 9), establish similar operational units (for example, ministries; Jang 2000; Kim, Jang, and Hwang 2002), and draft similar policies (most dramatically in national constitutions; Boli 1987). Such cross-national similarity, which appears in spite of the various configurations of local conditions and legacies, “makes sense only of common world forces at work” (Meyer et al. 1997: 152}
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Discussions on the influence of global conditions and forces on the nation-state converged on the welfare state, focusing on the scope, trends, and future of the welfare state, which is now under the mounting challenge of globalization pressures (for example, Mishra 1999; Burgoon 2001; Montanari 2001; Brady et al. 2006; Dedel 2006). Specifically, they describe the resulting transformation of the welfare state (for example, Freeman et al. 1997; Gilbert 2002), assuming a mounting crisis due to a funding predicament and a rising tide of neoliberal ideals (for example, Huber and Stephens 2001; Castels 2004). Noninstitutionalists, such as Lee and Strang (2006), join the debate by analyzing public sector downsizing in twenty-six OECD countries; yet Lee and Strang demonstrate this worldwide change in the state as a global diffusion process, and emphasize the role of institutional forces. From such a world society perspective, changes in the welfare state dynamics are understood against the backdrop of macrohistorical processes: worldwide changes to the state are driven by the diffusion of general societal norms, which, embodied in social policy, have become an integral part of the form and practice of modern nation-states (Chapter 7). Nation-states adhere to global norms of justice and progress and enact related scripts of social policy in order to be regarded as legitimate members of world society. In this sense, historical changes, here in the institution of the state, are a result of global constellations of actors and the culture that they carry. Meyer's work reinterprets this evidence of globalization effect on the nation-states by seeing such trends as isomorphic changes that produce weakly coupled state functions, thus highlighting the a-rational nature of state operation. Moreover, Meyer's work reinterprets the nature of global influence by regarding it as neither coercive nor direct, as presupposed by realists (Wallerstein 1973, 2000). On this point, the focus of academic discussion shifts to an analysis of the nature of global influence and to the associated mechanisms of influence, with the obvious nexus being not only the history of the state but also the implication in global governance (as reviewed in the section "Globalization"). On this point, Meyer's world society approach expanded the scope of study of even these global players; whereas political scientists focused their work on international organizations (for example, Diehl 1997), seeing the disciplinary commitment to interstate and formal exchanges, the neo-institutional approach to the study of the global emphasizes the role of global civil society, international nongovernmental organizations, and the professional experts and consultants (for example, Boli and Thomas 1997, 1999).

Third, the expansion of state functions in accordance with global expectations reflects the changing content of the state (Meyer, 1999; Chapter 7). On this matter, Meyer and his colleagues document the cross-national and global institutionalization of various social rights and services, which are increasingly in the care of the state: from education to human rights to the environment, many issues move from the private domain to be taken-for-granted elements of the public sphere. Meyer's work notes the shift from particularistic principles toward universalistic rights. This is most clearly evident in the changing logic for the incorporation of women into the public sphere, where the social role of women was restored "from motherhood to citizenship" (Berkovitz 1999). In describing the influence of world society on such substantive changes to the state, Meyer's work depart from the growing body of
work on the rise of international human rights in practice but more often in policy and legislation. For example, on the issue of ratification of international human rights treaties, realists describe the rampant ratification rate as a case of “cheap talk” (Hathaway 2003) or a tactical concession to international pressures (Sikkink 1999; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999). Others see this sweeping global rise as a result of action by organized social movements (Smith 1995; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Tsutsui 2004). According to Meyer’s world society approach, however, these issues reflect more far-reaching changes to the social role of the state: the rise of universalistic rights, now anchored in a series of international laws and transnational action, constructed a global human rights regime and this regime, like world society in general, imprints nation-states through its rather diffuse authority. The nature of this global regime allows for extensive decoupling between legislation and practice (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005), revealing the extensive ceremonial and ritualized nature of state operations (also see Koenig 2008). Therefore, even “cheap talk” or “empty promises” which while describing noncompliance with the human rights “norm cascade” frame those as strategic moves, are interpreted by Meyer in the context of modeling and enactment processes. It is because enactment is ritualized that hypocrisy likewise becomes routine (Brunsson 1989; Krassen 1999).

Overall, Meyer’s work offers a restatement of the role and nature of the modern nation-state in institutionalist terms. His statement engages him in current discussions in political science and international relations: Meyer, like many others, sees the state as being challenged from both market and global forces. Yet Meyer’s restatement also marks his distinction from the prevailing perspectives by seeing the state as reified by the same institutions that presumably challenge it: “globalization certainly poses new problems for states, but it also strengthens the world-cultural principle that nation-states are the primary actors charged with identifying and managing those problems on behalf of their societies” (Meyer et al. 1997: 157 [Chapter 8]).

The result is a dialectical process: not the weakening of the state that many political scientists were concerned about in the 1990s era of hyperglobalization, but rather further extension of the role of the state. This leads directly to a critical appraisal of Meyer’s contribution to the burgeoning field of theoretical and empirical research on globalization.

**Globalization**

Meyer’s comparative work predates any discussions on globalization per se: his collaborative work – initially focusing on cross-national development (Meyer and Hannan 1979) and subsequently maturing to a comprehensive statement of world society theory (Chapters 3 and 8) – sets the logic for comparative, historical, and later global studies even prior to the dramatic grip that the concept of globalization won in the social science imagination in the 1990s (Guillén 2001). With his constructivist tone, Meyer’s work defines the world as the relevant “social horizon” (Beck 2000) or the “imagined community” (Anderson 1991), and describes more social issues as global (Hwang 2006). This concept departs from the vision of the world as a united system (Moore 1966; Wallerstein 1973, 2000) to a vision of mostly economic and political trying to descendence.

In split comparisons, the shift from the worlds of the individuals (see culture as a broad theory in Chapter section, or Durkheimian shared m can be a world societal cosmopolitanism. Though rather than agents (i.e., the attention ment); in particular as prime and post-dramatic organization tradition more ne civil society configurations are Meyer (1989) models of circumstantial actors organize...
practice but more often in policy implementation of international human rights as a case of “cheap talk” rational pressures (Sikkink 1993; sweeping global rise as a result of Keck and Sikkink 1998; Tsutsui, however, these issues reflect the state: the rise of universalistic laws and transnational action, his regime, like world society in its insufficiency. The nature of this between legislation and practice and exchange ceremonial and ritualized. Therefore, even “cheap talk” or compliance with the human rights are interpreted by Meyer in the is because enactment is ritualized 88; Krasner 1999). The role and nature of the modern state engages him in current discussions; Meyer, like many others, sees the global forces. Yet Meyer’s restate perspectives by seeing the state as allegiant to “globalization certainly hens the world-cultural principle 1997: 157 (Chapter 8). of the state that many political of hyperglobalization, but rather is directly to a critical appraisal of theoretical and empirical research on political exchanges. Meyer’s emphasis on world society led to a stream of research trying to define and describe the features of this society that go beyond the dimensions of transference and transformation (see Bartelson 2000) and emphasize transcendence, or the constitutive change of meanings.

In spite of the emphasis on the notion of world society, the label for Meyer’s comparative work as late as 2003 was “world politik.” The subsequent terminological shift from highlighting the politik to emphasizing society does not represent a shift of the basic tenets of the approach. Rather, it reflects the roots of world society theory in the intellectual context of American sociology: Meyer’s hesitation to employ the term “society” comes as a reaction to the pre-1960 grand theories and from the post-1960 sociological rush to regard society as an aggregation of individuals (see section “Social theory”). Meyer’s reaction develops into an emphasis on culture as the defining dimension of society, and thus world society is defined as a “broad cultural order with explicit origins in western society” (Meyer 1987: 41 [Chapter 3]). This understanding of society, on which we will elaborate in this section, draws directly on two of the founding fathers of sociology, namely, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. From Durkheim, Meyer draws the emphasis on the shared moral understanding that underlies all social processes and structures and that cannot be reduced to individual or collective preferences; from Weber, Meyer draws the notion of occidental rationalization as specifying the basic cultural tenets of world society. On both, Meyer elaborates, for example, by spotlighting the universalistic norms of fairness and equality, voluntary and self-organized action, and cosmopolitanism as equally essential in specifying the cultural core of world society.

Though Meyer’s image of world society is basically as a sweeping cultural complex, rather than a forceful ideology or doctrine that reflects the interests of powerful social agents (for example, Hannes 1989), he deals extensively with the carriers of such global culture. According to his approach, formal organizations deserve closer attention here. As we pointed out in the section “Organization studies and management,” organizations encapsulate societal myths of rationality and modernity. In particular, international organizations, governmental as well as nongovernmental, act as prime carriers of world society as they themselves can be seen as the embodiment of its cultural core. They constitute the organizational backbone of world society and promote global diffusion processes. Over time, not only could one witness the dramatic expansion of these carriers (Bohl and Thomas 1997, 1999) but also the organizational backbone of world society became more heterogeneous. To the web of traditional international organizations, which is itself increasingly wider in scope and more networked (Dielh, 1997), was added a rapidly intensifying network of global civil society organizations (Florini 2000; Hall and Bierstecker 2002) and social movements (Tsutsui 2004). The main mechanism through which this heterogeneous configuration of global governance spread world cultural norms is what Strang and Meyer (Chapter 6) call “theorization.” Theorization refers to general and abstract models that allow for concrete recipes for action by transcending local, idiosyncratic circumstances. Such models include causal and normative arguments on how different actors all over the world—from nation-states to individuals—should behave and organize their affairs to be recognized as legitimate, modern actors. And, theorization
does not imply a strictly scientific understanding of the world, though scientific arguments are frequently employed.

Methodologically, Meyer’s inclination toward empirical research results in a rich tradition of quantitative longitudinal analyses, in this case, analyses of globalization. Such empirical studies are conducted in order to track the impact of world society on collective and individual actors. Relying mostly on secondary data, the main tools for the analyses of these data are regression analyses, factor analyses, structural equation models, and event history analysis (for reviews, see Schofer and McNeely 2003; Schneiberg and Clemens 2006; Drenti 2008). And although most of these research methodologies are rather conventional in social research, event history analysis in particular is both a fairly novel approach, at that time, and is attuned to the time component inherent in social processes such as diffusion and globalization. With its origins lying in epidemiological research and thus with its suitability to measure the spread of an infectious disease, event history analysis became the most useful world society methodology for tracking the history of "contagious" global processes, such as the national ratification of international human rights treaties (Wotipka and Ramirez 2008) or the spread of environmental policies (Chapter 11).

With these characteristics, Meyer’s approach plays a distinctive role in the burgeoning field of globalization studies. Based on both macrosociological and culturalist theoretical account and empirical research in the quantiative tradition, a broad theoretical and research agenda unfolds. Many of the chapters in this book give evidence of the fruitfulness and originality of this approach. Three issues in particular — diffusion, its carriers, and heterogeneity of outcomes — emerge from this research and offer not only a rich body of work to date but also possible directions for future research.

First, the notion of “diffusion,” which was defined and elaborated on in a series of institutional studies (Strang and Macy 2001; Dobbin et al. 2007), is a central juncture for Meyer’s engagement with the scholarship on globalization. The main emphasis of research by Meyer and his colleagues to date has been rebuttal of the realist descriptions of diffusion as either coercive imposition or strategic compliance. The intriguing puzzle to realist scholars is why states, some of which have the power to resist external pressures, would comply so faithfully with international norms, particularly those codified in international treaties (for example, Simmons 1998, 2000; Von Stein 2005; Simmons and Hopkins 2005; Avdeyeva 2007). It is commonly understood that diffusion is a process by which “external” influences come to determine “internal” forms; cross-national diffusion is evident in many social policies—from privatization (Levi-Faur 2003) and the rights of women (Ramirez, Soysal, and Shanahan 1997; Berkovitch 1999) to education (Chapter 9; Chapter 17; Schofer and Meyer 2005). Still, the debate rages on why (and how) global, or external, pressures come to mold processes and institutions that are internal to the nation-state. The debates revolve, therefore, not around the evidence for diffusion but rather around the issues of the sorts of influences and the varying degree of coercion involved in the process of diffusion. Meyer’s work, which focuses on the impact of world culture on diffusion patterns over and above the coercive influence of economic and political dependencies, demonstrates the importance of shared
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models, or cultural modes (seealso Lechner and Boli 2005). Here, there is an obvious
connection with several common terms to describe the conduit of influence along
which a practice or policy diffuses cross-nationally: terms such as "issue networks"
(Sikkink 1993), "policy networks" (Dahan et al. 2006), and "international regimes"
(Krasner 1983; Ruggie 1982, 1998) came to describe the social connections that
transmit global models. This organization of global networks, as both heterogeneous
and subject-oriented, leaves much room for cultural influence, as in Meyer's explana-
tions, whereas micro- and macrorealists—from neorealists (Keohane 2002) to world
system theorists (Wallerstein 1973, 2000; Chase-Dunn 1998) and those focusing on
the history of the state (most notably Charles Tilly and Theda Skocpol) narrow-
ly view culture as ideology and as subordinate to interests of power and influence.
Second, these divergent descriptions of global diffusion processes reflect the
unique explanations of the means by which diffusion occurs. Commonly, the debates
on this issue refer to the concept of "carriers" of globalization in an attempt to
identify the social actors that encourage and guide globalization. Though it shares
the "top down" model with many scholars of globalization who identify either economic
forces (Wallerstein 1973, 2000) or rule-making organizations (Barnett and Finnemore
2004) as encouraging global diffusion, Meyer's understanding of the nature of
such carriers is dramatically different. According to Meyer, the main carriers of
globalization forces are not nation-states, global economic forces, or even inter-
national organizations per se. Rather, the force that powers global diffusion processes
is world society, in a very broad sense. Therefore, while Wallerstein (1973, 2000) sees
globalization processes as being driven by direct force and compliance, Meyer
(Chapter 7) insists on the role of "soft" and diffuse mechanisms, in particular
theorization and the elaboration of related role models. In this way, Meyer goes
beyond the international relations scholars whose work centers on the teaching and
normative role of international organizations (for example, Finnemore 1993; Barnett
and Finnemore 2004; Barnett and Coleman 2005), by pointing out that the
mechanisms of global influence are less tangible and direct, though not less effective.
According to Meyer, the global source of influence is world society and its cultural
core, demonstrating the importance of universalist assumptions, of theorization,
and thus of standardized models in creating the platform for global diffusion. To
connote the diffuse nature of such influence, Meyer refers to it as the global social
"ether" (Meyer 2004). And although many world society studies quantify embed-
dedness in world society in terms of interaction with international organizations, the
idea is that such interaction is normative in nature, operating through diffuse and
cultural forms of authority. With that, Meyer problematizes, if not undermines,
the role of direct social contacts, physical interactions, and spatial proximity, which are
so heavily emphasized in network analyses of globalization.
Analytically, global diffusion processes in the social world parallel diffusion
processes in chemistry. According to world society research, cultural and structural
patterns of the West diffuse through space like a gas, beginning with regions of high
concentration of its molecules; eventually the gas molecules are equally distributed
in space, if the process does not encounter obstacles. This "top down" model is
accompanied by research methodologies measuring the diffusion of world societal
standards as a process of binary coding (adopted/nonadopted). Equally clear seems to be the distinction between "sender" and "receiver" in global diffusion processes.

On the one hand, however, the existence of modernity as a cultural complex acting as a sender of world societal standards could be challenged on both theoretical and empirical grounds. In particular, the reception of S. N. Eisenstadt's (2003) historical and sociological work on multiple modernities could lead to a more differentiated concept of the underlying cultural bases of modernity. According to him and other scholars, different axes of modernity, which evolved in the context of different civilizations, have to be assumed and should be studied more thoroughly. Over the last years, civilizational comparisons at the interface of history and sociology have been one of the most fascinating contributions to the field of globalization, and a more intense dialogue between scholars assuming multiple modernities and those following the world society tradition as elaborated by Meyer could open new avenues in globalization research.

On the other hand, the culture and historicity of the different societal contexts being shaped by world society are not fully taken into account. In most world society analyses by Meyer and others, these contexts are conceptually underspecified. They mainly appear at the receiving end of the globally diffusing cultural principles, neither as cultural contexts per se nor as actively shaping the cultural content of world society. In addition to closer investigations into the effect of world society on the culture and historicity of different societal contexts, further research is needed on the effects on world society's cultural content, resulting from the ever-increasing permeation of societal contexts. One could assume that world society as a virtual sender is also at the receiving end and hence subject to change.

Third, globalization with intense structuration and hyperrationalization creates complex situations rife with contradictions and hybrid forms through which emerge new patterns that cross-cut the alternative of adoption or nonadoption so familiar in diffusion research. And while Meyer's work is criticized for overly underscoring global convergence (Finnemore 1996), a stream of recent neo-institutional scholarship shows that the interaction between transnational arrangements and national paths allows for diversity of outcomes (for example, Djelic and Quack 2007). The research recalls ideas about globalization (Robertson 1994) and fragmentation (Rosenau 2003), and links with Appadurai's (1996) ideas about translocal cultures and Pieterse's (1995) ideas about coconstitution. Meyer's work regards hybridity as the evidence of loose coupling and a result of hyperrationalization (e.g., Meyer, Drori, and Hwang 2006). Indeed, cross-national heterogeneity also comes from the gap between policy charting and policy implementation, which is in cross-national diffusion. Institutionalists readily accept that loose coupling is inherent in the process of diffusion in general and in particular in global diffusion of, or compliance with, policy. Drawing on these insights, researchers are challenged to describe heterogeneity of outcomes and loose coupling in specific terms. The research methodologies common to world society theory have not allowed for specific findings that explain different degrees of coupling or pointed to the cultural and historical specificity of the determining societal context. Research designs that combine case analyses (of national histories or organizational biographies) with an overview global he

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Social theory

Meyer's work is squarely within the realm of neoinstitutional thinking in sociological
theory. The bulk of neoinstitutional research is conceptualized as middle-range
theory, which has had a strong and lasting impact on the interdisciplinary field of
organizational research since the 1970s (Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Greenwood
et al. 2008). Still, Meyer's work fills a macrosociological space in this field, which has
been left open due to the reaction to the discreditation of "grand theories" after the
demise of the structural functionalist approach of Talcott Parsons in American
sociology. This reaction, unfortunately, conflated "grand theory" (focused on abstract
explanations) with "macro analysis" (focused on systems and societies as a whole) and
obscured the Durkheimian definition of sociology as the "science of institutions"
and the related aspiration to develop a comprehensive account of society through the
analysis of its institutions. Meyer's world society theory seems to be a special case
within neoinstitutionalism since he and his colleagues developed a Durkheimian
"grand theory" of society. And as much as Meyer's sense of social theory is grounded
in researchable propositions and empirical analyses, thus fitting in with the American
idea of a "theoretical research program" (Berger and Zelditch 2002; see discussion in
the section "Organization studies and management"), the brevity of relevance of his
work defines it as a theory.

We highlight Meyer's contribution to sociological theory through discussions of
two ideas: (a) actorness and (b) rationalization. Both ideas draw from broad
understandings of institutions, in which the sociology of knowledge as elaborated
by Berger and Luckmann (1967) plays a pivotal role. Both ideas are also intertwined:
notions of agentic actorness are anchored in rationalization of the features of such
entities, whereas rationalization is rooted in the sense of agency and control of social
actors over their destiny.

According to the constructivist tone set by Berger and Luckmann, institutions
embody the basic rules of society, which define who the actors are and what the actors
are supposed to do. Formal rules, like laws that are set penalties for noncompliance,
are less important than routines and habits, whose character is mainly implicit,
informal, and taken for granted. Whereas this distinction between the formal and
the informal is widely accepted in sociology, Meyer's work stands in opposition to the
post-Parssonian era in American sociology, on two key points: (a) the dynamics of
causation between levels of analysis and (b) the constituted nature of the social actor.
First, in contrast to the "microsociological turn" in the post-Parssonian era in
American sociology, according to which routines and habits as well as broader
norms and values may be understood as locally constructed microphenomena,
Meyer's perspective is clearly macrosociological. The macrostructures of society,
which are conceptualized as a worldwide cultural frame with its historical roots in
Western society, constitute individual and collective actors. For Meyer, macrostruc-
tures influence norms and behavior. It is not actors and their interests who constitute
society ("bottom up"), but rather society, whose main cultural characteristics have become global over time, that constitutes actors in ongoing processes of rationalization ("top down").

Second, in strong contrast to the dominant realism in American sociology, in which bounded social actors are the taken-for-granted units of analysis, Meyer problematizes their constitution and the ongoing shaping of their behavior. This is an outcome of his emphasis on the cultural underpinnings of society. In this account, macrosociological structures are productive, creating new kinds of individual and collective actors. Here Meyer significantly expands the traditional focus on institutions, or "old" institutionalism: for him, institutions are intertwined with the constructions of the actor and thus they are far more than rules that limit or enhance individual and collective action. The construction of the modern actor, or the mythology of actorhood, is at the linchpin of Meyer's theoretical and empirical analyses, especially in recent years (Chapter 5).

Meyer points specifically to three kinds of actors: individuals, organizations, and nation-states. These actors increasingly prevail over alternative forms of societal actorhood, such as clans, families, or groups. What distinguishes modern actors is their unique sense of agency and strong sense of identity, which together form a sense of a rational and bounded agent (Frank and Meyer 2002; Jepperson and Meyer 2007). The development of this modern sense of actorhood, which is still going on, is explained as a historical process, in similar manner to macrosociological explanations by such authors as Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, and Elias. Societal rationalization, often through scientization (Drori and Meyer 2006), is the prerequisite for assuming individual actorhood and the loosening of the grip of traditional community structures (clans or families) into which one is born. Similar features of agency and identity are developing for organizations and nation-states, which too come to demonstrate rationalized expressions of identity and interest by them. The constitution of these various social actors is intertwined with extensive theorization of the actors' traits: for example, ideas about the life cycle are applied to firms, industrial sectors, and nations, as they would be applied to individuals. And, with such theorization comes profound standardization of what it means to become a modern, legitimate actor. Like most sociological theorists, Meyer contends that the actions of social actors are profoundly scripted, rather than rational calculations of means and ends. And while the social reward to scripted enactment is legitimacy, Meyer's approach is far from being strategic. Whereas other institutionalists (for example, Barnett and Finnemore 2004) consider enactment as a strategic move to gain legitimacy, Meyer contends that even strategic thinking, like other social action, is rationalized rather than rational. This ontology of the social actor contributes to "what Weber calls the 'rational restlessness' of the modern system" (Chapter 5: 109).

Rather than drawing solely on abstract reasoning, Meyer's ideas on the construction of actors in society are based on numerous quantitative and empirical research projects. This book is testimony to the strong empirical underpinnings of the world society theory, revealing how Meyer and his colleagues demonstrate that broader world society principles such as universalism, fairness, and the belief in progress are intimately linked to the construction of modern individuals, organizations, and...
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ation-states in contemporary society (Chapter 5). This empirical research explains
the dramatic expansion of education (Chapter 9; Chapter 17; Schofer and Meyer
2005) and the remarkable globalization of human rights (Chapter 13; Ramirez,
Suarez, and Meyer 2006) as actorhood-driven and actorhood-producing trends. This
empirical emphasis in Meyer's work often masks the link between his ideas and other
developments in contemporary, mostly European, social theory. Nevertheless, while
Meyer very rarely engaged European social theorists directly, his works expand on the
issues of the social system, power, and agency. In the remainder of this section, we
explicate Meyer's social theory by comparing his work with that of Michel Foucault,
for the discussion of actorhood and with that of Niklas Luhmann, for the discussion of
the contradictory trajectories (homogenization and differentiation) of the social
system.

There are strong paradigmatic differences between Foucault's and Meyer's ap-
proaches: while Meyer stresses durable continuities in the long-term process of societ-
ralization, Foucault recognizes historical discontinuities and individual con-
tingencies whose specificities cannot be forced into a coherent "grand" narrative
(Foucault 1972). Furthermore, there are obvious methodological differences be-
 tween Meyer's rigorous quantitative approach and Foucault's equally rigorous focus
on texts. Nevertheless, there are at least two clear junctions between their distinct
theories (Krücken 2002: 248-253). First, both scholars see individual actors not as
given entities, but rather as the result of ongoing construction processes. Meyer
focuses his commentary on scripted action, while Foucault argues that individual
subjectivity is intimately linked to submission and obedience (Foucault 1990;
Martin et al. 1993). Both demystify individuality by highlighting its standardization,
even thus from actor-centered social theories, which - unlike traditional sociological
thinking that in this instance can be traced back to Marx - take individual actors for
granted and do not offer an explanation for their emergence in specific sociohisto-
rical processes. In addition, in both approaches - with the notable exception of
Foucault's early work on madness and civilization (1965) - there is no way out of
rationalized society. Following both, one can hardly assume "lifeworlds" (Habermas
1985/1989), a "world of subjectivity" (Touraine 1995), or simply a "self" (Castells
1996) that can be set against broader rationalization processes. And, following both,
rationalization processes are driven neither by political and economic forces (Habermas,
Touraine) or technology (Castells). Rather, rationalization is driven by "soft"
processes of influence: Meyer explains the impact of routines of organizations and
Foucault emphasizes such media as textbooks and treatises. This emphasis on
transformation of social impact, and in particular the role of science, is the second
junction between Meyer and Foucault. Both scholars relate science and its tax-
onomies to identity formation: Foucault (1980) analyzes technologies for compiling,
classifying, and statistically analyzing the ever-increasing amount of data as a source
and the power to define social categories, while Meyer (Drori et al. 2003) stresses the
recursive processes of the scientization of society and the socialization of science. For
both, science is a lever for social order, including identity formation, structuration,
and governmentality; for both, constituted order or control, come within the "iron
cage" of one's own design (Foucault 1991; Drori et al. 2003). Finally, these junctions
between Meyer and Foucault come to be reflected in some post-Foucauldian research: for example, the shaping of states and organizations by broader discourses is analyzed in a way that partly resembles neoinstitutional thinking (Rose and Miller 1992; McKinley and Starkey 1998). Still, an important difference between them comes from their distinct understandings of authority and power: according to Foucault, control is centralized and power is unevenly matched, whereas by Meyer's account, authority is diffuse and order emerges from theorized relations among formally equal and thus comparable social entities.

A second major contribution of Meyer's work to social theory lies in further developing Max Weber's insights into the rationalization of society (Weber 1958, 1968). In contrast to other interpretations of Weber's multifaceted work, Meyer sees Weber as the most explicit theorist of occidental rationalization, and he extends Weber's rationalization thesis into a globalization thesis by arguing that the main tenets of occidental rationalization—in particular, the belief in progress, justice, the spread of means/end-rationality, and, most importantly, the universality of such belief—become global. Still, Meyer's interpretation of rationalization as a homogenizing force leaves out the implicit images of conflict theory that underlie Weber's work. Weber (1949) argues that rationalization also leads to different "spheres of value" and results in societal struggles or conflicts (Kampf, see also Brubacker 1984; Oakes 2003). On this point of contention, between images of rationalization as setting a social trajectory of homogenization or differentiation, Meyer's work intersects with that of Niklas Luhmann.

Images of modern society as composed of different, at times conflicting, spheres are well established in European social theory. For example, Bourdieu (1984) argues that distinct societal fields (such as the economy, arts, and politics) may both overlap and be composed of diverse subfields, and that success in one field cannot easily be translated into other fields. Not unlike Bourdieu, Giddens (1986) distinguishes the distinct modularities in the structuration of institutions, where specific combinations of rules and resources constitute distinct political, economic, legal and other institutional domains. Luhmann's systems theory (1995, 1997) similarly defines society as functionally differentiated into autonomous systems.

Much like Weber and Meyer, Luhmann refers to a unique set of sociohistoric circumstances as the trigger of modernity (Hasse and Krücken 2008). Yet, as distinct from Meyer and Weber, Luhmann points to "functional differentiation" as the substitute of vertical stratification: the economy regulates the production and distribution of scarce products and services, science generates new knowledge, and the political system is unique in producing collectively binding decisions. For Luhmann, politics and science, for example, are distinct societal systems with characteristic rationalities that can be subordinated neither to the logic of other systems nor to a broader, all-encompassing kind of rationality as implied in Meyer's work. And whereas Meyer emphasizes the loose coupling among policy and practice or between subunits, Luhmann's idea of functional differentiation implies a high mutual dependency among subsystems. This has implications for outcomes: Luhmann's work, particularly on risk and the environment (1989, 1993) and in general on modernity (1998), shows how dependency is both a strength and a permanent source of
vulnerability of modern society. From this perspective, societal integration or homogenization on the basis of universal norms and cultural principles cannot be achieved; instead, modern society is shaped by very distinct yet fundamentally interrelated societal logics. For Meyer, while various trajectories are considered (Meyer et al. 1975), and variation is evident (Drori et al. 2003), the overall trend is one of isomorphism, particularly cross-nationally (see section “Globalization”).

The differences between the two perspectives can be illustrated by referring to the environmental problems on which both authors have written (Luhmann 1989; Chapter 11). According to both Meyer and Luhmann, environmentalism cannot be traced to deteriorating conditions of the environment, but rather is attributed to macrosociological factors. From Meyer’s perspective, the rationalization of the environment through scientific expertise and transnational environmental organizations allows for the legitimacy of this emerging institution and for its institutionalization and globalization. From Luhmann’s perspective, while environmental problems transcend the binary logics of society’s distinct functional systems, environmental issues need to be translated into the binary logic of each functional system, in order to affect it. This implies two things. First, each social system will react to environmental problems only according to its own logic. Second, and following from the structural logic of modern society, no coherent answer can be given at a larger societal scale. According to Luhmann, the unity of society lies paradoxically, in the diversity of its systems. Similar comparisons can be made on the study of the expansion of the welfare state (Luhmann 1993; Chapter 8; Drori and Meyer, forthcoming).

This comparison accentuates the profound differences between a homogenizing theory of rationalization (Meyer) and a theory of societal differentiation (Luhmann). Though these approaches can hardly be integrated at a meta-theoretical level, both Meyer’s and Luhmann’s works can be used as guidelines for reestablishing a sociological macro-perspective. While Meyer’s theory is particularly good at analyzing diffusion processes that transcend sectoral boundaries of society and shape all units of analysis, Luhmann’s systems theory instead focuses on differences between societal systems that cannot be transcended. At the interface of these very different paradigms, there is scope for important new developments in theoretical and empirical research, taking into account contradictory societal pressures toward homogenization and differentiation.

Summary: Breadth of intellectual and empirical relevance

This review of world society theory places Meyer’s theoretical and empirical contributions within the context of social science work in general. We relate world society theory with other intellectual endeavors in the social sciences, from other sociological approaches and social institutions to other social theories of world affairs, from colleagues to critics. Many of them share terminology with world society theory; others share a deeper conceptual understanding. Most clearly, “open system” ideas about the situated nature of social units, which came from the work of Meyer and his colleagues in the 1970s, have become commonsense notions in the social sciences;
here, obviously, the commonality between Meyer’s institutionalism and other “open system” approaches is rather “shallow.” Lately, several other concepts that are central to Meyer’s world society theory have become commonly used by social scientists of different theoretical stands: in this list of shared concepts are “embeddedness,” and “rationalization,” and indeed “world society.” Yet the common terminology does not translate to similarity of minds: the terminological “bridges” across the theoretical divides do not erase the substantial conceptual differences, some of which we allude to here.

This account of the commonalities and distinctions between Meyer’s scholarship and other theories and issues in the social sciences reveals Meyer’s relevance to current social theory and its wide appeal to scholars. For example, Meyer’s work transcends the “Atlantic divide” in the social sciences. On various issues – from social theory and international affairs to organizations – European scholarship has an essential understanding of world society because there are many institutional insights available in European intellectual field. For example, European scholars from Luhmann to Bourdieu convey a constructivist image of the social actor, thus allowing a point of connection with institutionalist scholarship. At the same time, Meyer’s work is American in its empirical emphasis and its ambivalence toward (grand) theory. Overall, therefore, this review of Meyer’s work, placing it in the context of the social sciences, demonstrates Meyer’s unique stand as a macro-phenomenological institutionalist. This intellectual perspective, with its richness of concepts and research tools, is engaging and reforging existing arguments about issues central to the social sciences. As the various chapters of this book attest, this theoretical approach has been applied by Meyer and his coauthors to the study of numerous issues.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Following the commentary on the context and relevance of Meyer’s work to social science research, this book proceeds with an overview of world society theory in Meyer’s words. Chapter 2 offers a personal account of Meyer’s intellectual journey, outlining the core tenets of world society theory. Meyer reviews the theory’s intellectual history (its roots in Weberian thought and breakthrough ideas), outlines the theory’s themes, summarizes the research agenda that opened the door to a highly prolific empirical tradition, and surveys the scope of research.

Part II reviews the concepts and processes that came to define world society theory and highlights four of them: rationalization (which strongly ties in with Meyer’s later work on scientization), actorhood, diffusion, and globalization. These four concepts make up the scope of the theory’s theoretical reach: by explicating the four key “building blocks” of world society theory, this part lays the foundation for Part III.

Part III demonstrates the breadth of world society theory by highlighting some of the numerous social institutions, varying from the nation-state and management to the European Union, that have been (re)interpreted from this theoretical stand. In spite of the variety in sectors and issues, the compilation reveals the far-reaching
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THE BOOK

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World Society: A Theory and a Research Program in Context

relevance of world society theory. These chapters speak of both the theoretical and
the empirical: for example, the chapter on the environment tells of both the
constitution of a global network of organizations and describes the global rise of
environmentalism. Social scientists with different interests can find in this part
a world society interpretation of their fields of interest, and they can also identify
the "bridge" between their field and others.

The inclusion of these many chapters relating to social institutions creates two
challenges. First, including ten chapters and thus the subject matters required us to
make tough editorial choices: Meyer wrote extensively on many of these subjects,
particularly about education, and we carefully chose the piece that accentuates his
contribution or is most recent. Second, the inclusion of papers on ten different topics
creates some redundancy in the presentation of the abstract arguments. Nevertheless,
we chose not to edit Meyer's work but rather to maintain the rhythm and clarity of
Meyer's pieces in their original form. We trust that the full-length version also allows
for comprehensive institutional analysis of each institution, thus reinforcing the
theme of the breadth of world society theory.

Part IV includes a bibliography of Meyer's work. This list is intended to serve as
a source for readers, demonstrating the breadth and history of Meyer's contribution
to sociological thinking and research.

REFERENCES


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