

Priorities in Today's Institutions

Unpublished essay, 2021

Prologue

My approach to “institutions” relies as much as possible on the everyday use of the term: a social organization operated by people for selected purposes. Examples include schools, athletic teams, police departments, and corporations. This essay explores the priorities of large and small institutions today—and the debates over which priorities are best.

But the term “institution” is defined in many different ways, especially in academia. For instance, [Jonathan Turner](#) analyzes institutions as broad segments of society—economy, kinship, polity, law, education. [Douglass North](#) defined institutions as the norms governing behavior rather than the organization of activity. I rely on the outlook of [Raimo Tuomela](#), who argues that “collective intentionality” of groups enables institutions to function.

Related Essay

For a discussion of how institutions fit into the broader category of social groups, see the “Group Behavior” essay—part of a collection of work on my website exploring the [methods for human history](#).

Essay

Typology of Institutions

Here are descriptions of the functioning of several types of social institution, according to a typology based on the logic of collective intentionality. The typology describes institutions under three main categories: the *functioning* of the institution, the *benefits* and beneficiaries of the institution, and the periodic *reproduction* and regulation of the institution.

In the *functioning* of an institution, the typology describes the **purpose** of each institution, the **members** of the institution who cooperate in its work and their roles, the **process of institutional work** (its equipment and the transformation of inputs into outputs), and the **clients** of the institution (persons supplying input, receiving output, or persons transformed by the institution). The institution has patterns for **decision-making** and **governance**; it may have **contributors** such as investors.

The *benefits* of the institution may be material, social, or cultural, and they can be distributed in various ways. The **beneficiaries** may include groups and subgroups of members, clients, and contributors—they will necessarily have **contending priorities** for the institution and its work. The **general public** may also see the institution as having positive or negative benefits.

The *reproduction* of the institution becomes necessary when members must be replaced or when its social function must change. The timing of reproduction sets the length of a generation for each institution: the essential information on the functioning of the institution must be preserved and conveyed to the next generation. Generational reproduction also provides an opportunity for social regulation of an institution.

Institution: Schools

Functioning. The purpose of a primary school is to teach young children the fundamentals of reading, writing, calculation, plus socialization and introduction to social values and institutions. The members of this institution include teachers, teaching aides, administrators, and staff for cleaning, transportation, and office work (also with student health and discipline). The process of the school requires investment in a school site, classroom furniture, books, and supplies. It requires a curriculum to be taught. Clients begin with the students, who are to undergo transformation as they learn. Other clients are suppliers of equipment, parents who send their children to school, and other institutions to which the students go after completing this school. Decisions in the school include the many decisions by teachers regarding each student, the organization of classes and employment of teachers, and the larger decisions on curriculum and financing of the school. Evaluation of the students, the teachers, and the curriculum are a necessary part of replicating the school's operation. Schools have local administrators but are also governed by larger units, such as school boards, towns, or religious organizations. Contributors to the school may include parents who volunteer their support, governing bodies providing funds for the school.

Benefits and beneficiaries. Beneficiaries of the school begin with the members of the institution. Students may benefit through their personal development, while parents benefit from the learning of their children. The local community may benefit, over the longer term, from the preparation of young community members with improved skills. Yet there can be debates on class size, curriculum, the teachers employed, and the overall cost of schooling.

Reproduction. The timing of reproduction in a school is set especially by replacement of administrators and teachers but also by changes in the students and parents. While individual schools vary in the timing of such reproduction and perhaps reorganization, they can often operate for as much as 20 years until the end of a generation and the need for reproduction and replacement.

Institution: Restaurant

Functioning. The purpose of a restaurant is to prepare food for customers who pay for the food. Customers either take the food away or eat it in the ambience of the restaurant. Members of this institution are its employees, owner, and managers. The members are to obtain utensils and foodstuffs, prepare the food through cooking (requiring a kitchen and its equipment), serve it to customers (in a space for delivery or seating), collecting payment from customers and making payment to suppliers, clean up each day, and repeat the operation; there must be an overall management of the work. The work process involves collecting and storing materials, cooking in advance or in response to orders, preparing and delivering food to customers, accepting payment and managing funds. On-the-spot decisions are made by cooks, cashiers, cleaners; larger-scale decisions are made in employment of staff, maintaining equipment, purchasing foodstuffs. Clients on the supply side are the daily suppliers of foodstuffs and cleaning materials, plus the periodic suppliers of equipment. Clients on the consumer side are those who decide to visit this restaurant. There may be contributors such as banks that loan money to the owner.

Benefits and beneficiaries. The beneficiaries of the restaurant are the owners, the other employees, the suppliers, the customers, and the contributors. There are differences among them on employee hiring and earnings, prices for inputs and for the food on the menu, preferences for the specific food provided, the priority given to cleaning. The broader community may find the restaurant to be a positive or negative factor.

Reproduction. The timing of a restaurant's reproduction depends on the need to replace the owner or a cook, but also on changes in the taste and preference of customers. Restaurants are small institutions in rapidly changing environments, so their generations are commonly 5 to 10 years in length, after which they must undergo replacement and reproduction if they are to continue for another generation.

Institution: Language

Functioning. Language was the first human institution, and it remains the most basic. Language is quite different from other institutions, yet an understanding of the way language performs its task through collective

intentionality is helpful in understanding the working of other institutions. The main task of language is oral communication among members of the language community. Members include all who have learned to speak each language. The input and output of language are the communications expressed, heard, and understood. Language facilitates most social activities, so that language may become specialized in each social situation. Managers and clients are far less important in language than are the members, who exchange information based on their immediate needs. Members work very hard at learning when they are new to speaking and listening, yet they continue learning throughout life. Language generates many innovations, especially new terms and new ways of expression. These innovations may survive and thrive based on approval by other members. Contributors to a language may include speakers of other languages who contribute new words.

Benefits and beneficiaries. All members of the speaking community benefit from language and its communication. Individuals and groups have varying priorities on how spoken communication should take place.

Reproduction. Reproduction of language usually takes place continuously, as children learn from their parents and peers. Language continuity and change is mostly by consensus, though sometimes individuals and groups are influential in modifying language. But because the difference in age between a mother and her children averages between 25 and 30 years, one may say that a generation for language reproduction is also 25 to 30 years.

Institution: Police

Functioning. The task of a police force is to review and enforce public order, provide service and safety, and halt violations of law. Members are police officers, administrators, and support staff. The work process includes patrol, response to emergencies, and processing of cases of persons arrested. Clients include those who call for police support but also those who are investigated or detained by police; clients also include the judicial system to which the accused are sent. Decision-making includes individual decisions of officers in any encounter with people, decisions of police administrators on handling of cases, and questions of the level of armament and deployment of arms by officers. Police departments are generally part of a hierarchical system of government that provides funding and oversight.

Benefits and beneficiaries. Beneficiaries are all members of the police force. In general, all community members are expected to be beneficiaries of police services, but inevitably some parts of the community feel they are served and others feel they are exploited. Thus, who is the community? Formation of strong police unions has strengthened the benefits of police officers in their negotiations with governing officials and community groups.

Reproduction. A police force undergoes reproduction when key members must be replaced. In situations of social unrest, such reproduction and regulation of a police force may be fairly frequent. In conditions of social stability, a generation for a police department, with its replacement and reproduction, is about 20 years. In situations of social conflict and dispute, calls for reorganization of police forces may shorten their generations to 10 or even 5 years.

Institution: Corporation (Example of a Meat-Packing Corporation)

Functioning. The task of a corporation is to produce goods or services through a large organization with multiple owners who invest in it. In this case, a meat-packing corporation may be a subsidiary of a larger corporation with more general tasks in food processing. Besides owners, members of the corporation include a work force of production workers and workers in maintenance, shipping, administration, marketing, and management. The process of work is the collection and slaughter of livestock; the storing, cutting and packaging of meat (all in a cold environment); the disposal of unused parts of carcasses; maintenance of equipment; and delivery of packaged meat to purchasers. Clients are the suppliers of livestock and of processing equipment, as well as purchasers of processed meat at wholesale or retail levels. Decisions are individual worker decisions in cutting meat, management decisions on the organization and the speed of work. Do CEOs alone make management decisions? Does a more broadly-based decision-making yield better results or bring failure?

Benefits and beneficiaries. The beneficiaries of a meat-packing corporation are the members (including managers, employees in production, administration, and maintenance); the clients (suppliers and customers); and the owners and other contributors. Workers are concerned with working conditions, wages, and health and welfare benefits; clients seek to negotiate the terms of purchase and sale.

Reproduction. For a corporation and its facilities, reproduction depends heavily on the rate of depreciation of the equipment, for which age and obsolescence will require large-scale investment in no more than 20 years and often less. Location of a factory is also important for both supply and demand, so that reproduction may entail the closure of an existing factory and opening of a new factory. Thus, a generation for a corporation can range from 10 years (for capital equipment and investment conditions) to 20 years (for the replacement of a work force after retirements or migration).

Similarities and Differences of These Institutions

The five institutions considered here are schools, restaurants, languages, police, and corporations. They vary widely in their size, their tasks, and the specific skills required of members. Some can be seen as part of the private sector of the economy (the restaurants and corporations), others as part of the public sector (the police and many of the schools), or as part of the foundations or exchange-supported sector (language and some of the schools). Nevertheless, many of the same patterns and concerns show up in all five—and in the many other types of institutions of the world today.

These institutions all have significant internal functions, requiring cooperation among the members. In that sense, the institutions function autonomously. But most institutions also interact closely with clients, where clients are individuals and institutions who are not members of the institution. These include suppliers and customers for restaurants and corporations, students whose knowledge is transformed by teachers, and the clients of police, for which relations vary widely. For the institution of language, focused on communication, virtually all the interaction is among members of the language community; there are almost no clients outside the institution.

The issues of benefits, beneficiaries, and reproduction of institutions are shown to be issues of importance. Many of the disputes in society can be shown to be expressions of contending perspectives about the operation of institutions, involving differences among members, clients, and the general public. I have estimated the length of a reproductive generation for the institutions discussed at from 5 to 30 years, depending on the specifics of institutional tasks. This issue of periodic reproduction of institutions is worthy of additional attention.

Institutional perspectives are helpful in examining numerous social issues. In recent times, especially in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, substantial attention has been given to groups labeled as “essential workers”—in these cases, teachers, police, and production workers in meat packing (health workers have been prominently listed as essential). These workers may have professional qualifications or substantial on-the-job experience, but they are understood to work in exposed conditions, to put in long hours with difficult work, and to provide essential services for which there is immediate need. Their skills and decisions are accorded high respect, yet their formal reward by the society that praises them is often minimal.

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

INSPIRATION FOR THIS ESSAY:

Jonathan Turner, Human Institutions

Jonathan H. Turner, *Human Institutions: A Theory of Societal Evolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), Kindle loc. 88–159, 189.

Institutions are an important topic because they are the structures that enable human populations to adapt to their environment. We can define social institutions, therefore, *as those population-wide structures and associated cultural (symbolic) systems that humans create and use to adjust to the exigencies of their environment*. Without institutions, humans do not survive, and societies do not exist. Institutions are thus fundamental to the viability of humans as a species.

Despite the fact that many subfields in sociology are dedicated to the analysis of human social institutions, conceptualizing institutions as a distinct level of social reality remains problematic. Typically, it is the organizational units from which institutions are constructed that receive most attention. . . . Indeed, the “new institutionalism” in organizational theory is more about organizations in their cultural environments than it is about the specific dynamics of the institutional systems, per se. . . . There can be little doubt that there is a mesolevel bias in studying institutions.

One way to overcome this mesolevel bias in institutional analysis is to conceptualize the levels at which human societies unfold as they grow and develop. Each level, I argue, is driven by its own distinct set of forces, creating structural and cultural forms that are unique to a given level of reality. . . . Some are microchauvinists, proclaiming that all reality is ultimately constructed from interpersonal processes; others are macrochauvinists, arguing that all microlevel processes are constrained by larger-scale sociocultural formations. . . .

Rather, the macro, meso, and micro levels of social reality *are* just that: real. One can see distinct structures at each of these levels, and the goal of sociological theory is, in my view, to explain the forces driving their formation.

In this book, I analyze the initial emergence and subsequent development of the core social institutions of human society—economy, kinship, religion, polity, law, and education.

At the micro level, the encounter is the basic structural unit; at the meso level, corporate and categoric units are the key structures; and at the macro level, institutions are the essential structures. An *encounter* is an episode of mutual awareness among individuals punctuated by communication that shapes the eb and flow of face-to-face interaction. . . .

At the meso level, two structural forms emerge: corporate and categoric units (Hawley 1986). A *corporate unit* is typified by a division of labor organized to pursue ends or goals, however clear or vague. The basic forms of such corporate units are groups, organizations, and communities. A *categoric unit* is formed by distinctions that people make and use: gender, age, class, ethnicity/race, region, and the like. Members of these social categories share certain distinguishing characteristics that mark them for differential treatment by others.

At the macrolevel of reality, institutions are the essential structures. Institutions and their corresponding systems of cultural values, ideologies, and norms allow populations as a whole to adapt to the environment, both the biophysical and sociocultural. Macrolevel analysis will, therefore, revolve around developing theories about the forces that drive the formation of institutional systems as populations adapt to the biological, physical, and sociocultural environments in which they must be sustained (including those created by the very act of social organization.)

Institutions are generated, sustained, and changed by population, production, reproduction, regulation, and distribution. Each of these forces constitutes a basic contingency of human existence, pushing individual and collective actors to build particular kinds of social structures and cultural systems.

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

INSPIRATION FOR THIS ESSAY:

Douglas C. North, “Institutions”

Douglas C. North, “Institutions,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 5 (1991): 97–98.

Institutions are the humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction. They consist of both informal constraints (sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions, and codes of conduct), and formal rules (constitutions, laws, property rights). Throughout history, institutions have been devised by human beings to create order and reduce uncertainty in exchange. Together with the standard constraints of economics they define the choice set and therefore determine transaction and production costs and hence the profitability and feasibility of engaging in economic activity. They evolve incrementally, connecting the past with the present and the future; history in consequence is largely a story of institutional evolution in which the historical performance of economics can only be understood as a part of a sequential story.

The major focus of the literature on institutions and transaction costs has been on institutions as efficient solutions to problems of organization in a competitive framework (Williamson, 1975, 1985). Thus market exchange, franchising, or vertical integration are conceived in this literature as efficient solutions to the complex problem confronting entrepreneurs under various competitive conditions. Valuable as this work has been, such an approach assumes away the central concern of this essay: to explain the varied performance of economies both over time and in the current world. . . . The central issue of economic history and of economic development is to account for the evolution of political and economic institutions that create an economic environment that induces increasing productivity.

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

INSPIRATION FOR THIS ESSAY:

Raimo Tuomela, *Social Ontology*

Raimo Tuomela, *Social Ontology: Collective Intentionality and Group Agents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 214–15, 234.

Social institutions and the facts based on them conceptually pertain to social groups (e.g., communities, societies), and I will accordingly regard them as necessarily being group phenomena. Social artifacts such as social institutions are created (not always intentionally) and maintained by “us” (the group members) for us, i.e., for the use of our group. My approach to social facts and institutions accordingly is based on collective acceptance explicating conceptual construction. In a world without human or human-like beings and their conceptual activities, there would be no institutional facts. Indeed, I will argue that social institutions in general should be taken to be based on we-thinking (in the we-mode) rather than I-thinking (I-mode).

Social institutions (such as the institutions of money, marriage, and private property, as well as many social organizations) basically consist of a *norm* system and a system of *social practice* conducive to the satisfaction of these norms. Hence social institutions can be taken to refer both to the behaviors characteristic of institutional behavior and to the underlying social facts and norms that explain such behavior. . . . Social institutions typically have as their general goal or at least function to create order in society by solving coordination problems and collective action problems involving conflicts between individual and collective rationality. Institutional solutions are typically collectively beneficial for the community in question, and they also help individuals to satisfy their basic needs.

- Institutions are constituted by practices and norms (including task-right norms to govern task division) and are collectively constructed, basically real normative action systems.
- Institutions are conceptually group-based phenomena with we-mode groups (ideally) as their host groups.
- Institutions are conceptually based on the we-mode collective acceptance, although they may involve much I-mode institutional action.
- The ontology of the social world cannot be satisfactorily characterized by a priori philosophical reflection alone but should be informed by, and rely on, empirical social research, too.