God, Love and Other Good Reasons for Practice: Thinking Through Institutional Logics

Roger Friedland
Professor of Religious Studies and Sociology, UC Santa Barbara
Visiting Professor of Social Research and Public Policy, NYU Abu Dhabi

“Organizing Institutions: Creating, Enacting and Reacting to Institutional Logics”
ABC network conference, Banff Springs Hotel, June 14-16

Forthcoming in
"Institutional Logics in Action"
edited by Michael Lounsbury
July 15, 2012

I am both honored and humbled by this invitation. As a scholar who studies seemingly atavistic and sometimes arcane politicized religions, I am honored to find my ideas of use to scholars of business which rules our world. I am humbled because you use them to analyze phenomena embedded in research traditions about which I have little knowledge. So I am fearful that I will both misstep delineating your terrain and what I have to say will seem an idiosyncratic fancy, a conceptual retrograde. It is only because Michael Lounsbury keeps asking me to write things that I know anything at all. Today I intend to talk God to business scholars. While this prospect makes me nervous, I ride on the powerful wings of Max Weber and, after reading Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury’s new and important book (2012), dare imagine that I might intellectually instantiate an analogue to the institutional agency of J.C. Penney who transposed the love of Christ to mass retailing.

I will both look back and forward. First, as requested by the organizers, I want to say something autobiographically about where my approach to institutional logics came from. Second, I want to explore what it might mean for theorizing institutional logics if we take seriously Max Weber’s polytheistic theory of value spheres. And third, I want to use an imagined religious sociology to say something both about works that extend, modify and apply the institutional logic perspective, as well as those that offer alternatives to it, sometimes agonistically suggesting that the institutional logics approach is fundamentally flawed, non-agentic, apolitical and hence ultimately useless. I offer then both personal genealogy and polemical dialectic.

Origins

I have developed my understanding of institutional logic through the modern state, the gates of Jerusalem and my wife’s womb, figures respectively of power, divinity and love.
The notion of institutional logics immanent in nested “symbolically defined”
practices was first put forward in Powers of Theory, an examination with my mentor Robert
Alford, of the capitalist, democratic and bureaucratic aspects of the modern state (Alford and
Friedland, 1985: 432). Powers have, we argued, an institutional specificity and theories a
home domain. There we spoke of the ways in which institutional logics are tied to
vocabularies of both motive and belief, and the ways in which the very appearance of
interests are conditioned by those logics.

That work in political sociology was being completed in the wake of my fieldwork on
the vexed, and sometimes violent, relation of religion and nationalism in Jerusalem, whose
lessons I sought both to apply to and align with our institutional understanding of the
democratic, capitalist state, even though religion per se was almost entirely absent from that
text. In Jerusalem I had been struck by the fact that struggles over space and time were
simultaneously struggles over their meanings, that cosmological commitments conditioned
social movement strategies (Friedland and Hecht, 1996). I quickly understood that my
explanatory habits would have to be complemented by interpretive moves. The instrumental
categories of power and interest, in which I had been schooled at the University of
Wisconsin sociology department through which I had sought to parse the social world, did
not suffice in this thrice holy, multiply cleaved, cosmic navel. What was most vexing were
my intellectual colleagues and friends who insisted that any effort to take religious motive
and meaning seriously was a reactionary diversion from the materialist battles at hand in the
heat of the Reagan years. In their eyes I was both analytically and politically misguided. It
was whispered that I must have become religious. In any event I had been taken in by a
world which did not qualify as one.

During the last quarter of a century I have been exploring a domain apparently far
from your own, the other real fiction that shakes our world these days, not property or
money, which is in – but not of all things, but the other god who claims the word as His
proper name. As the work on Jerusalem progressed, I began to study the religious
politicizations that by the late 1970’s were already remaking our world – helping elect
Reagan and bring down the Soviet Union – in Iran, the United States, Israel, Palestine,
Algeria, India, Pakistan and Turkey. Again, I noticed that my colleagues tended to look for
what was behind these movements, offering instrumental explanations in terms of power – of
citizens, men or political elites, control of territory, access to jobs or income (Friedland,
2011a, 2011b). Politicized religion was usually understood as a mediation for something
else, often a rational response to powerlessness (Habermas, 2003; Lincoln, 2003). That
people understood themselves as instruments of the divine did not figure in their accounts,
that they were willing to die for the cause difficult to explain.

The elemental thing about contemporary religious nationalisms, or politicized
religions if you prefer, is that they seek to change institutional boundaries between religion
and nation-state. Religious nationalisms variously aim at transforming the identity, the
ground of authority and the cosmological or salvific significance of nation states (Friedland
and Moss, forthcoming). Rather than building from the material and political interests of
groups, the social as an agonistic struggle over culturally contentless means, I wanted to understand the logic of their political practice from within the institutional space of religion out of which they were operating in a vocabulary hermeneutically adequate to their politico-religious projects, not unlike the way we analyze markets or democratic electoral contests. My primary intellectual object was the internal institutional order of their practices, not the external conditions of their possibility.

It was in the midst of this effort that I wrote “Bringing Society Back In” with Robert Alford in 1991 (Friedland and Alford, 1991). On the one hand, it was aimed at the reduction of the social to individual and organizational decisions, whether rational choice theory regnant in political science or transaction cost or principle-agent in the study of business firms. On the other hand the essay sought to marry the interpretive turn to a non-totalizing understanding of the social as a tense order of interdependent and contradictory, heterologous institutional fields. That meant further eroding the sociological realism of Powers of Theory and exploring the conjointly ontologically subjective and objective order of institutional life. Using categories like “symbolic” and “ritual,” I was struggling to develop an adequate conceptual language. Institutions, we argued, “are symbolic systems which have non-observable, absolute, transrational referents and observable social relations which concretize them.” (Friedland and Alford, 1991: 249). What I wanted that essay to show was that you didn’t have to travel to Jerusalem to live there, that all institutions had metaphysical foundation beyond sense and reason. It implied that a trans-institutional understanding of instrumental rationality was likely a misspecification, and that we had to make preferences endogenous in institutional theory. It implied that subject formation and object formation are co-implicated. And it intimated that every institution is religious, that we are the secular priesthood of modernity outing modernity’s fetishisms on a selective basis.

This work on politicized religion brought me to God, not just as a reason, but quite unexpectedly, as an analytic category. Rather than just seek to explain religion, I increasingly imagined that one might also look to religion as a template for studying institution itself. One finds such intimations in the philosophical works of Jacques Derrida and Martin Heidegger, for instance, but more importantly for our project, in the sociology of Max Weber. Weber, who famously proclaimed the modern world’s “disenchantment,” asks us to think of the social order as composed of a multiplicity of “value spheres,” each a domain that of a “god.”

This brings me to where we must perforce begin. After our twin daughters were born, almost twenty years ago now, and I had first carried them and placed them in my wife’s arms, I called up my best friend, who happens to be a social theorist, Jeff Alexander, and told him: “You know what’s wrong with social theory? There’s no love in itanyplace.”

The utter lovelessness of social theory has increasingly disturbed me. There is something spooky, even perverse, about a field in which a theorist like Michel Foucault, to whom my understanding of institutional logics is indebted, can put the details of torture on display, but cannot conjure a single caress, even when he talks about Greek erotics!! The
barriers to the figure of love are just as entrenched as those that preclude thinking God as a conceptual tool. This is, in part, because of the way we imagine the partition of public and private, wherein human love is declared publicly inadmissible. “Because of its inherent worldlessness,” Hannah Arendt writes in *The Human Condition*, “love can only become false and perverted when it is used for political purposes such as the change or salvation of the world” (Arendt, 1958: 52).

It is staggering when you think about it that a practice, category and experience without which most of us would not find it worth living cannot be made to appear in our thinking of the social. Again it was Max Weber, that stern diagnostician of rationalization, whose account is saturated with the problem of love and with traces of the erotic, who suggested to me that we might want to reconsider that absence, and that the logic of institutions might be a site in which to do it.

**Max Weber’s Value Spheres and Institutional Theory**

My effort to understand politicized religions brought me to Max Weber. I came late to Weber. When I read Weber’s extraordinary essay “Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions” I saw that he had, a century before, laid out a way to conceptualize institutional logics (Weber, 1958d: 324). The paradox is that by examining the religious modalities of worldly abnegation Weber not only developed an institutional portrait of the world, he conceptualized that world as religious. Weber, who famously proclaimed the modern world’s “disenchantment,” asks us to think of the social order as composed of a multiplicity of “value spheres,” each a domain of a “god.” Weber’s theory suggests a religious sociology, one that applies to modern science as much as it does to pre-modern monotheisms, to political leaders of nation-states and professionals as much as priests and other kinds of religious specialists. If we take Weber’s god-talk seriously, institutional theory becomes a genre of comparative religions. It may sound like a naïve confection, but I wish to argue that God and love — two categories subject to endless sociological reduction — are immanent in institution. I want to take up Max Weber’s institutional polytheism as an exercise in religious sociology and a potential resource for a theory of institutional logic.

Weber distinguished instrumental and value rationality: In the former, actors are instrumentally and cognitively oriented to observable external objects and persons through which they seek to serve their own purposes extrinsic to those means. In the latter they are passionately and expressively oriented to unobservable values they have internalized and in whose unconditional requirements they believe. Value rationality involves an orientation towards an internally binding subjective value, to a “cause,” of which the act is presupposed to be an expression or “relevant” to its “possession.” (Weber, 1958b: 151-154; Alexander, 1983: 22-29). In the former actors are oriented to observable and determinate consequences, to causal relations; in the latter to a value from which “practical stands” can “be derived with inner consistency” (Weber, 1958b: 151) or “a way of life” which actors *presuppose* has an inherent relationship to the possession of that value (Weber, 1958b: 153-154). The one aligns purpose and consequences, the other value and action: Weber thereby splits the
rational pursuit of consequences without respect to value from the realization of value without regard to consequences.

Value rationality is regionalized into what Weber calls “value spheres,” relatively autonomous domains of action oriented towards determinate, incommensurable, ultimate values: divine salvation in religion, aesthetics in art, power in politics, property in capitalist markets, erotic love, knowledge in science. Weber’s value spheres each have an institutional logic. Each value sphere, he argues, has a “logical or teleological ‘consistency,” a consistency that exercises a “power over man” (Weber, 1958d: 324). The logical is driven by intellectual elaboration, whereas the teleological is located in the relationship – a “sublimation” or a “direct appropriation” Weber calls it – between practice and value, in the case of religion, for example, between magic, orgy, contemplation, asceticism on the one hand, and various religious or “holy” states on the other, which are “meant to take possession of the entire man and of his lasting fate” (Weber, 1958c: 278-279).

For Weber all value rationalities are religious. Value rationalities are socially grounded in ‘value spheres’ or ‘life-spheres, each of which is governed by different laws’ (Weber 1958a: 123; 1958d: 323-324, 328). Judgment of the “validity of such values,” Weber writes, “is a matter of faith” (Weber, 1949: 55). Like Kant’s categorical imperative which rests on the autonomy of will, value rationality depends on autonomous, conscious judgment independent of one’s relationship to external objects, but unlike the categorical imperative, there is no rational ground for this value judgment and its universalization as a law (Rutgers and Scheurs, 2006). Religious values can neither ground themselves in reason nor the senses. The value rationality of religion depends on intellectual unreason, what Weber calls “the sacrifice of the intellect” (Weber, 1958d: 352). In their respective spheres, values function as “gods of the various orders,” or “godheads,” which in their plurality must be considered a “polytheism” (Weber, 1958b: 148-149).

Weber saw divinity in the social, unlike Durkheim, who saw the social in divinity. Durkheim and Weber both understood the sacred and value respectively as involving an irrational passion beyond reason, exceeding, indeed undoing, the autonomous and instrumental individual (Friedland, 2005). As Durkheim’s account of effervescent rite makes clear the category of the sacred has no cultural content, it being the transmuted form of the social, deriving its authority from the collectivity, known through the groups who form around it and sanction its violation. The Weberian category of value, in contrast, has a cultural content, a substantive value with a “determinate content” which derives its authority from the will of those who value it, known through the particular discourse and practices through which it and its constituting conflict with other values is effected.

Value spheres all depend not on what Boltanski and Thevenot reduce to the creativity of “inspiration,” but on what Weber terms “illumination.” A religious person receives the meaning of the world not through intellectual abstraction, nor through his senses, but by “reception,” by “virtue of a charisma of illumination.” (Weber, 1958d: 352-353). Every value sphere hinges – in its formation, its defense and extension, its
differentiation and elaboration on such irrational illumination. No value sphere can justify the ultimate value upon which it depends. Each depends on an intellectual sacrifice. This is clear even in Weber’s understanding of science.

For Weber all value rationalities not only are religious; each value rationality is a kind of love. The god of salvation religions, upon which he modeled his value spheres, is a god of love, indeed a personal god distinguished by His love. To believe in this god is to believe in a god who loves, indeed it is to believe in a love which has an eternal — if unobservable and unknowable object. Value rationality depends on passionate choice. Not surprisingly, then, there is a conceptual kinship between value rationality and what Weber termed “affectual” action, one of his four types of social action, here action determined by “the actor’s specific affects and feeling states” (Weber, 1978: 25). Each of these two forms of rationality – value and affective is done “for its own sake,” the difference between them located in the former’s “self-conscious formulation” and its “planned orientation” (Weber, 1978: 25). Moreover values are themselves affectual, not simply ideas that have validity. Weber understood values as feelings, repeatedly invoking the notion of “value feelings” (Weber, 1975: 182).

One must love to order loves. To be a political leader, Weber argues, one must both love and be willing to fight for one’s love. For Weber the political decision on violence was secondary to the violence of decision, between values, between gods, and, he implied, between lovers. Weber moved effortlessly from politics to war, suggesting the homology between a defeated people like the Germans, a defeated party and finally a rejected beloved.

The last, the lover, is compared to “world views among which in the end one has to make a choice.” “Rarely will you find,” Weber wrote in this context, “that a man whose love turns from one woman to another feels no need to legitimate this before himself by saying: she was not worthy of my love….(Weber, 1958a: 117-118).

The Nature of Institutional Deities

Weber’s polytheistic analysis of value spheres figures the task of institutional theory as a kind of comparative religion. What manner of deity do we worship in the non-religious value spheres? How does Weber’s institutional polytheism align with his sociology of religion? The answer is: It doesn’t.

Weber distinguishes between the immanent, impersonal God who anchors mysticism and the transcendent, personal creator God who anchors salvation religions (Weber, 1958d: 325). In the first, one seeks to possess the divine in the moment, hungering for a sign that one possesses the divine in the now. In the second, one is an instrument of the divine, seeking evidence through practice that one is loved by God for all time. Weber’s value spheres do not line up on one side or the other of this sociology of religion. They are ordered around a polytheistic pantheon of immanent gods, in which there is a “having,” an apparent “possession,” of the sacred value (Weber, 1958d: 328). Yet, consistent with a transcendental god, each of the value spheres involves a kind of world-mastery, no matter how small the world.
Immanent and transcendent, instrumental and ethical, polytheistic and monotheistic: The value spheres do not line up neatly on one side or the other. The solution I want to suggest is that there is an inherent, on-going oscillation of transcendence and immanence in each institutional sphere, a possibility towards which Weber himself gestures – however briefly, when he argues that disenchanted domains of modernity appear as impersonal forces, but in reality, operate as immanent divinities, animating the causal order of the social world.

Weber claims that people do not want to become aware of the irresolvable conflicts between these values, because they do – implicitly or explicitly choose which value to serve in a world with neither the one god, nor a prophet to guide and ground that choice (Weber, 1958b: 153). We do not want to face up to the fact that we serve values as though they were deities, and groundless ones at that. We rather imagine that our choices are externally constrained by the causal nature of an object world. As the claims for and the scope of religious ethical systems have been challenged and attenuated, we moderns fail to recognize that the “routines of everyday life” are likewise grounded in their respective “gods.”

Today the routine of everyday life challenge religion. Many old gods ascend from their graves; they are disenchanted and hence take the form of impersonal forces. They strive to gain power over our lives and again they resume their eternal struggle with one another (Weber, 1958b: 149).

Dominant forms of instrumental rationality screen operative value rationalities, enabling us to occlude value as interest. Whether auto-critique or not, given his predominantly objectivist reading of capitalist development, Weber is here arguing that disenchanted domains of modernity appear as impersonal forces, but in reality, operate as immanent divinities, animating the causal order of the social world.

By understanding values as gods we can destabilize the subject-object schemas that undergird our understanding of social life, making social objects into subjects and people into their instruments or objects. Each institutional sphere is characterized by two complementary moments of possession. Pushing Weber’s intellectual architecture I would argue that an institutional value operates as though it were a transcendental, eternal “subject” that can bind humans for its own sake (Weber, 1958d: 354). Weber’s institutional values operate as inner-worldly salvational gods, in that they are singular, transcendent sources of orientation, invoked as unobservable “subjects” who make demands, of which individuals seek and claim to be instruments. One seeks to know oneself as being loved by a god, of being its instrument.

If institutional values are salvation gods in this sense, then value rational action in a sphere is animated by and organized around the problem not of having the value, but of being had by it, of being chosen or possessed by it, not of loving the value, but of being loved by it. Institutional values can neither be derived from the senses nor intellectual abstraction, but they are that for which the religious man makes “himself ready for the reception” (Weber, 1958c: 280; 1958d: 353). A “religious state” is one that “is meant to take
possession of the entire man and of his lasting fate” (Weber, 1958c: 279). Value rationality appears as an act of will, of judgment, but, in reality, it is an active passivity, enabling oneself to be possessed, a possession over which in ascetic Protestantism – as “grace” one has no influence. In Weber’s value spheres the world can love us in a plurality of ways.

Values, Substances and Institutional Gods

What Weber calls the “gods” of the value spheres I have termed institutional “substances,” the unobservable, but essential, “value” anchoring an institutional logic (Friedland, 2011). The category of substance derives from Aristotelian metaphysics where substance, or substantial form, is the foundation, or essence, of a thing that cannot be reduced to its accidental properties which attach to it nor to the materiality of its instances (Aristotle, 1998). For Aristotle, substance is not matter, but the form that makes matter a “this,” “that by virtue of which the matter is in the state it is in” (Aristotle, 1998: 167, 229). A substance exceeds its attributes, cannot be reduced to a thing’s materiality, and thus cannot be described, only pointed to and named. While the category of substance is epistemologically problematic, it captures institutional reality rather well. Like Aristotle’s soul as the substance of human, an institutional substance does not exist; it is rather an absent presence necessary to institutional life.

Thinking of institutional logics as an exercise in comparative religions helps clarify their nature. Substances, like “hidden” or transcendent gods, are invoked by name, as though they are eternal subjects who act in this world or as though they refer to knowable objects or states to which one has an instrumental or possessive relation. But a substance is not a subject. Nor can it be an observable object, had or even known. Substances are unknowable, not, for example, unknown “epistemic objects,” (Arjalies, 2011). Substances are, however, enacted through material practices organized around objects, through things and bodies, and the words by which they are named and constituted. Property is enacted through one’s physical access to and transfer of all kinds of objects, God in the prayers for birth, death or healing, popular sovereignty through electoral votes, love through intimate sharing of voice, body and babies, knowledge in the experimental observation or abstract logical representations such as these. Through these practical ontologies, substance is transfigured into real objects, the metaphysical into the physical. Substances possess; they cannot be possessed. They center each institutional domain. We are made and make ourselves in their image.

An institutional logic is a trinitarian order of production. In the institutional logic framework, which counter-intuitively has had most impact in that domain where instrumentally rational understandings of social action have primacy, namely business and management schools, I posit socially regionalized orders of practice which are simultaneously orders of subjectification and objectification. These orders of practice depend on particular identities of subjects and ontologies of objects, which in turn depend on these same orders of practice (Friedland, 2011a, 2011b, 2009). A substance is the metaphysical foundation of the institutional logic, which provides the telos of the subject, the basis of her identity and an
ontology of the objects deployed in her practice. Institutional logics join subjects, practices and objects into bundled sets that have an inner referentiality, orders in which the substance – the central “object” is unobservable, while being endlessly invoked by name and enacted in practice, whether God, love, sovereignty or property. Institutional logics are virtual production functions, not values per se, but ideas of material world-making.

Substances create resources, they are the ground of powers, not as exterior legitimations, but as interior constitutions. An institutional logic presumes that institutional meanings, on the one hand, and individual or organizational interests and powers on the other, are interdependent. It is not just, as Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury argue, that institutional logics posit “different interpretation of how to use power” or that power is exercised in particular ways in response to conditions of “cultural heterogeneity” (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury, 2012: 64-65). Institutional logics differently constitute what power is. Power carries the force of an institutional logic.

An institutional value, or substance, founds the ontology of the central object or state of being through which normatively enforced practices are organized and hence constitute the resources through which powers are afforded and upon which those practices depend. Power is interior to practice. The value of knowledge, for instance, grounds facts or results produced by practices of scientific representation by scientists whose access to the production of those facts is a source of power. The value of God grounds salvation produced by practices of piety by believers whose access to that salvation is a source of power. The value of freedom grounds popular sovereignty produced by practices of electoral representation by voters and parties whose access to the production of that representation is a source of power. The value of property grounds priced commodities produced by practices of production and market exchange by their owners, whose relative power derives from their access to the monetary flows that follow from their exchange. The value of love grounds marriage by couples whose practices of sexual fidelity, cohabitation and sexual reproduction generate family solidarities to which both gendered and generational powers attach.

Institutional logics must have some measure of practical specificity. Material practices operate through and on objects, whose ontology is both necessary to and effected through these practices. A large and growing body of research shows how new institutional logics involve the transformation of practices through which objects are handled as they are reformed and/or get taken up by one logic or another, as, for example, in the case of higher education textbooks as they move from professional editorial to corporate profitability (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999), art as it moves from aesthetic works appreciated by curators and collectors in community museums to scholarly objects knowable by museum professionals (DiMaggio, 1991), money as it moves from a stock of wealth to be preserved through passive investment trusteeship to a speculative portfolio of capital assets to be maximized by mutual fund money managers (Lounsbury, 2007; Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007), recycled goods as they move from activists who speak in the name of the community and nature to commercially employed professional technocrats who constitute it as a commodity in their work for profit-making firms (Lounsbury, Ventresca & Hirsch, 2003),
software as it is located in corporate and open source community (O’Mahony & Ferraro, 2007), knowledge as it moves from the results of academic science to patented commercial property (Colyvas and Powell, 2006), or a restaurant meal as it moves from the ambit of the restaurant proprietor to a nouvelle cuisine chef (Rao, Monin & Durand, 2003). While not necessarily raising to the level of a substance, most do and all involve transformations in the ontology, or the nature, of the object, what it is and what it can do. Institutional logics all bind value, practice and object.

Institutional logics are, one might say, practical forms of value rationality. Weber made a fateful analytic choice, refusing to locate value rationality in material practice, but rather in the conjunction of value and commitment, sign and subjectivity. Institutional logics presupposes an immanent relation between value and practice, not as in Weber, a conscious, increasingly rationalized “deduction” of “practical postulates” (Weber, 1958d: 324), but a transcendence that requires immanentization as its condition of social possibility. Substances, the god-terms of institutional life, are immanentized through material practice. Unobservable substances must be transmuted into observable objects – nested and interlocked which are the means by which practices are anchored, effected and oriented. An institutional substance requires not only the repeated calling out of its name, a discursive renewal of commitment and belief, a pretense that an unknowable substance functions like a knowable object, but enactment through routinized practical conventions. Unobservable substances must be transmuted into observable objects – nested and interlocked which are the means by which practices are anchored, effected and oriented. These are the dual sociological grounds of its eternality. Values must be both exteriorized as material practices that deploy objects as they are interiorized as possessions that possess their practitioners.

Catholic rite is not a residue of magical instrumentalism, as Weber contends, but of performative material practice that inhabits every institutional sphere, although we may, as Weber himself noticed, fail to notice it. This transom between transcendence and immanence suggests that the material world – its objects and the practices that depend on them – may be a constituent, not a substrate, of institutional life, that the materialist-idealist divide is a false, forced choice. Not just idealism, but a relentless materialism can be a carrier of false-consciousness, things themselves the veils. Instrumental rationalities may contain and conceal value rationalities, which are their foundation.

I think of institutional substance as the ground of many of the dimensions that Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury elaborate in their micro- and organizational specification of institutional logics, as the X-axis of the ideal types in the inter-institutional system, certainly the source of legitimacy, but also the basis of strategy and source of identity (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury, 2012: 56). The idea of a substance seems to transport us back to the old institutionalism, with its emphasis on the internalization of values as the normative basis of stability (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury, 2012: 32-42). I think of it rather as a bridge. It is cognitive, a basis for classifying actionable objects, and normative, as a transcendental value which specifies what ought to be desired, thus a good in both senses. It does not order social life around culturally contentless solidarities or structures of...
domination. It does not block agency and variation as Thornton et al. understand Parsonian value terms to do (Thornton et al, 2012: 44), but enables them on the one side because they contingently form agents who accept and identify, or reject and disidentify, with the ultimate reality of the substance, and on the other, because of the contingent form of its immanenctization, that different constellations of objects and material practices can be deployed in its name.

Subjectification and objectification can be contested and transformed because there is a certain “modularity,” the term used by Thornton and her co-authors, such that logics can be transposed from their home domain into others thereby transforming the material practice and its meaning (Thornton et. al, 2012: 60-62). The limits of that decomposability remain to be specified. While the relation between an institutional logic and its practical order may vary, it is not, however, arbitrary. Institutional language does not operate as just a sign system, it helps produce that to which it refers. It is not a grammar, nor a vocabulary. It is performative and it approximates or mimes symbolization in that the relation between language and the signified is interior, not exterior. It is, I suspect, material practice – something about which we have as yet very little to say that helps make the language of institutional life symbolic. As theorists of objects have shown us, their meaning and function depends on the practices conducted through and with them (Nicolini, Mengis and Swan, 2012). Might it be that those practices depend on the objects through which they proceed?

The notion of an institutional logic also bridges voluntarism and structuralism. A substance not only grounds and is grounded in the formation of subjects, but in material practices whose objective order, its routine organization of practice through objects, allows for institutional reproduction without internalization or consensus. Institutional logics undo the conceptual heterogeneities separating the rational and the non-rational, the technical and the cultural, the material and the ideal. They put into question the autonomy of Richard Scott’s institutional pillars the regulative, normative and cognitive (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury, 2012: 36-39, 51). I read Scott’s three pillars as rules establishing the right, a value establishing the good and an ontology constituting the real (36-39). An institutional logic is ordered around regimes of practice, constituted by specific congeries of rule, role and category. Rules enforced by different forms of coercion, roles grounded in the production of particular values, and categories delineating the real are co-implicated in each logic. Institutional logics do not parse easily into cognitive, normative or coercive orders. They are productive, obligatory and performative. Institutional logics yoke the performativity of language with the productivity of material practice.

Institutional logics do not negate agency. There is much criticism of institutional theory for its lack of agency and contest in institutional accounts, about the “paradox of embedded agency” or a “consensual frame” or “a truly consensual ‘taken for granted’ reality,” as Fligstein and McAdam put it (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012: 89; 2011:11). This criticism of institutionalism as non-agentic derives from the original problematic of isomorphism, why organizations in particular fields have such similar attributes. Institutional logics both require and enable a fulsome individuality, requiring individuals to identify with its substance and
enact its logic in practice under changing circumstances with uncertain reference, enabling them to choose the basis of their identification and to “transpose” its elements to other domains of practice (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury, 2012: 60).

A social world composed of multiple institutional logics entails five moments of potential agency: identification or dis-identification with the substance of the institution, the contingent and contested conjunction of substance and material practice, the distributive struggles for the objects at stake within a field, the offensive and defensive possibilities of expanding or protecting the social scope or reference of an institutional logic, and the prospect of combining or even transforming institutional logics. The conditions for and the relations between these forms of agency, both within and between organizations and institutional fields all require specification. If anything an institutional logic requires too much agency, an agency for which its theorization cannot yet account, an accounting complicated by the assumption that agency itself the nature of the subject, the manner of his action and the forms of his practical rationality are likely to be contingent upon the institution in which he operates. This is something to which MacIntyre pointed in the co-implication of forms of practical rationality and understandings of justice, and to which Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury point in their conception of “bounded intentionality” (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury, 2012: 78-83). Institutional logics both require and enable a fulsome individuality. There is no “paradox of embedded agency” (Holm, 1995). The paradox would be a dis-embedded agent.

**Strategic Action Fields**

Institutional logics posit a social world that is a world of purposes and the powers they found before it is a world of powers and the purposes that legitimate them. It is a world of complementary and contradictory orders of value production in determinate social locations before it is a world of transposable conventions. It is, in other words, a different social world, or a different part of the world, than the strategic action fields imagined by Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam or the polities of worth elaborated by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot. I want to question the ways in which each duo align power and culture. If the first American pair posits a culturally poor power, making its distribution the homogenous purpose of social life, the second French one posits mechanisms of valuation whose politics have been dislodged from institutional space and their register of powers thereby reduced. Both center around observable contestations animated by the question of distribution. The first operates at a structural level, the second at a situational level. Institutional logics, in contrast, posit a systemic level of production which may allow us to wend our way between a power without culture and a culture without power.

Fligstein and McAdam creatively marry social movement and field theory taking as their object episodes of contention where collective actors mobilize and build coalitions using innovative forms of action and new identities. Although Fligstein and McAdam define strategic action fields as domains of interaction among actors who share “common understandings about the purposes of the field,” these purposes are analytically irrelevant to
field dynamics. Those purposes, they contend, are not to be found in something like an institutional logic. The concept of institutional logic, they write, “is too broad and too amorphous to really capture the set of shared meanings that structure field dynamics” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012: 10). Meanings for them, however, are actually derivative political instruments because strategic action, they affirm, is about control (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012: 17). A field, they write, “is really an arena where individuals, groups, or organizations face off to capture some gain” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2010: 42). Both the coherence and the dynamism of a strategic action field derive from actor competition for “what is at stake,” over “the division of spoils in the field.” Their social world is a Bourdieusian space of inter-locked fields each now populated by group actors whose relative positions are secured through settlements and unsettled by exogenous shocks deriving from other usually proximate fields, that shift resource dependencies and open political opportunities.

Fligstein and McAdam correctly point to a defect of the institutional logic approach, that it never theorized how institutional domains structure the distribution of resources or objects, when and with what consequences distributional conflicts emerge, including their capacity to reshape an institutional logic.” But this is not a warrant to reduce institutions to domains organized around an institutionally homogenous project of sustaining unequal distributions. The goal of incumbents, they argue, is “to preserve or expand their power in the field by using the structures and meaning in the field to full advantage” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2010: 27). Powers have been unhinged from field-specific purposes and practices. Field “purposes” are “adapted,” in their view, to the “interests” of dominant groups that derive from their positions, positions “defined by their claim on the lion’s share of material and status rewards” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012: 13). Identities are likewise understood as devices used by actors to “promote the control” of others, as bases for the construction of a “new conception of control” which affords redistributions of resources (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012: 17; 2010: 36). “Challengers have sold themselves on some collective identity to justify their position as challengers,” they write (Fligstein and McAdam, 2010: 35).

Understanding culture as an instrument in the struggle for institutionally homogenous powers leads the authors to understand the American civil rights movement primarily as a shift in power structure as opposed to a shift in the institutional scope of liberal democracy. This may help one discern how inter-field dependencies establish political opportunities, but it brackets how the nature of the focal field both offers identities and values pursued for their own sake, as well as conditions the strategies both challengers and incumbents can use. It is no wonder they end their earlier article with the “fundamental” question: “if the modes of collective action are similar in markets and politics then what makes them different?” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012: 23).

The Convention of Worlds

Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thevenot’s *De La Justification* – published in the very same year as “Bringing Society Back In” fashioned a theory of conventions, which in its very anti-institutionalism, deserves our careful and constructive engagement. Conventions are
bundled practices of qualification of “beings,” both humans and things, according to a standard of worth. Conventions work by establishing equivalence among people and things, according to which they have more or less worth “states” of worth with respect to a metaphysical “common principle” (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2006: 141; Boltanski, 2011: 27). Each order of worth is a polity held together not by domination still less by the prospect of or the past incidence of violence – but by the “fundamental equality” or “humanity” of its members and their agreement on the value of its value, on its kind of worth as a common good (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2006: 13, 25). Conventions of worth and the principles that underlay them are not “legitimations” à la Weber (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2006: 37). Justification and critique are interior to institutional life, a process missing in much institutional theorizing (Daudigeos and Valiorgue, 2010).

Boltanski and Thevenot invert the social universe of Pierre Bourdieu. Rather than structured fields, for instance, they center on situations. Instead of an unconscious doxa inferred from regularities of social practice observed and interpreted, their evidentiary base is composed of orthodoxies distilled from the texts of philosophers and manuals for practice. Canonical political philosophies offer “grammars of the political bond.” The practice of logic here is the logic of practice. If oppositions to Bourdieu abound in conventions of worth, so do consonances with institutional logic. But there are major differences as well.

Unlike institutional logics, conventions of worth are not tied to institutional spaces or fields, but are “embedded in situations” (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2006: 145, 150). Boltanski and Thevenot seek, wherever they can, to strip their polities of particular institutional meanings so that they can serve as all-purpose grammars. They describe principles of worth and their respective qualification practices so that they can apply to any institutional field. While that allows them to identify the ways in which orders of worth situationally come into being and combine in “compromises” – here in the business world – it not only understates the primacy of a central value in the field in which the situation takes place, the conventions’ very generality can end up evacuating, if not violating, the institutional specificity of that order of worth in its home domain.” To secularize divine grace as human inspiration, for example, is to make man into God and to suggest that those who seek grace seek participation, in small, in divine creation. The grammar is worse than meaningless: It is blasphemy.

Orders of worth are selectively de-institutionalized. Domestic worth, although “always constructed in the image of the father, whose state of worth is highest because he is the incarnation of the tradition” is neither limited to procreation nor the household, applying equally to hierarchies of dependence to “important persons,” whether boss or king (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2006: 165, 168). Due to this anti-institutionalism there is neither the making of life nor love in domestic worth.” Some conventions, however, have fixed, determinate institutional moorings, such as civic worth, which depends entirely upon a state, upon legal rights and electoral representation (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2006: 192-193).
Boltanski and Thevenot ground their theory in the practice and language of the institutional site of civic worth – a republic. Their decision to “politify” the orders of worth is not unrelated to their move from a critical sociology to a sociology of critique. Institutional combinations and conflicts are conducted through arguments – critique, denunciation and justification – which issue in test purifications, generalizations and compromises. Their polities accordingly do not admit the exercise of power, let alone violence. Indeed they treat the operation of power (and interest), both in sociological explanation and as a social form of stepping outside of all polities to establish a “general equivalent,” as a relativism that “aims at abolishing…the very possibility of the existence of a common good” (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2006: 341).

For them, in this exercise, power is neither structural, nor systemic, never inherent in mechanisms and operations that do not pass through justification and decision, the “motives and causes invoked by the actors” (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2006:344). Not surprisingly while the analysis is replete with modalities of critique and compromise between orders of worth, they do not have much to say about conflicts of worth that do not resolve themselves through agreements about higher, more general principles of common good, through privatization of one of the goods or through an agreed suspension of judgment (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2006: 336-340).

Boltanski has recently recanted both the anti-institutionalism and the repudiation of power. The pragmatics of critique, he admits, presumed too much capacity for agreement on the part of actors. The pragmatics of practice alone can neither stabilize convention nor generate critique in any given situation. Social interaction can neither generate value nor normative test formats (Boltanski, 2011: 80-81). Boltanski now points to a level of analysis above the test-determined reality of situations, that of institutions which secure “the whatness of the what is” (Boltanski, 2011: 55). “What are we doing exactly? (Boltanski, 2011: 71). If conventions operate as qualifications of people, institutions operate as qualifications of action and the quasi-objects they entail. Thus the property or capital necessary to market value is the result not of a convention, but of “[i]nstitutional operations” (Boltanski, 2011: 77). Institution is required to fix a type of action and its referential relation to a situation as a token of that type (Boltanski, 2011: 68-70). This normative fixing is the core of institution, a primordially semantic function. This appears to undercut the previous insistence that orders of worth should not be socially located either in a group or a sector.

Boltanski aligns the institutional level with the exterior, totalizing logic of domination, as opposed to the interior, pragmatic logic of power operative in disputes at the situational level. Domination operates through institutions whose semantic function, the fixing of a type of action, a bodiless institutional being securing an immaterial state of “being,” depends on the use of coercion (Boltanski, 2011: 75). As he says, “semantic work and police work go together” (Boltanski, 2011: 79). The institution as a bodiless being has replaced the principle of equivalence; coercion stabilization by things, violence immanent in the hermeneutic contradiction the agreement at a higher level of common worth. The bright bodily republic of worth has been lodged under the dark, disembodied state.

Love and the Institutional Life of Mortal Gods
Institutional theory is a terrain in which it is not only possible to develop a religious sociology, but a theory of passionate fields. An institutional value or substance is a mortal god, one that repeatedly risks death, who is forever dying, becoming inert, dead letter, only to be brought to life again as it is enacted in practice. Death’s possibility is systemic, there in financial collapse, the erosion of marriage, the repudiation of scientific truth, the evacuation of the practical scope of sovereignty. But the elemental death is in the heart of the believer. I have cast institutional substances as institutional gods, which one loves and by which one is authorized as a lover, and hence formed into particular kinds of individual and collective subjects.

Love follows the logic of identification. Institutional life does not operate based solely on a cognitivism, through differentially activated schemas, a taken-for-grantedness (Thornton et. al, 2012: 90). It demands myriad moments of located passion, an order of desire to which Max Weber once attended and we appear to have forgotten. Love is a being given oneself through a relation with an other. I think it is worth returning to the non-Kantian aspect of Weber’s value rationality, not just the passionate irrationality of will, but its non-autonomy, and its inevitable incompleteness in enactment. Value rationality never completes us; it is a pleasurable agony to which we aspire over and over again, corporate titan no less than the composer, the pilgrim, the social theorist or the cheerleader. We live for those moments of possession, returning over and over to the prospect of this be-coming. Animated by desire, it is also fraught with danger that one will be destroyed, found not worthy, able only to go through the motions, remaining untouched, untransformed and transforming nothing. In the moment of grace or illumination the religious person becomes a new being – reborn or redeemed, as Weber glosses the “highest conceptions” of salvation (Weber, 1958c: 279) temporarily aligned with something he can never secure, that will always exceed him. And it is through his rebirth that the institutional value is reproduced, brought alive once again, able thereby to call others. It is not different for the scholar who somehow etches out a new connection, espies an unseen strata of reality, the political leader who crafts a viable new vision for the nation-state, the entrepreneur who offers a new commodity, or even property, form on the market, the artist who creates beautiful forms and, of course, the lover who allows himself to be possessed by a woman (or man) who will offer him (her) the recognition and the possibility of being anew. These can all be, and indeed should be, read in instrumentally rational ways, as the control of goods – of knowledge, power, profit, art, sexual bodies but that does not negate the other side in which one is possessed, and indeed transformed, by the substance or value, never completed, but offered the ecstasy of new possibility, the same kind of humility of desire with which one takes and is taken by a lover or a god. Institutions do not operate through an included exclusion of bare life, but of love, without which they would be dead letters indeed.

References


Daudigeos, Thibault, and Bertrand Valiorgue. 2010. ""'Convention Theory': Is There A French School of Organizational Institutionalism?"." in AIMS.


Thornton, Patricia. 2004. Markets From Culture: Institutional Logics and Organizational Decisions in
This is a revision of a talk delivered at the ABC Institutional Logics conference at Banff in June, 2012. A number of people have helped me in writing this paper particularly Diane-Laure Arjiales, Tom Carlson, Damon Golsorkhi, Michael Lounsbury and Stefania Tutino. I should also like to acknowledge my conversations with Jason Hopkins, Joanna Steinhardt, Nesrin Unlu and Matt Wilson, all members of my graduate seminar on institution at UC Santa Barbara in the spring of 2012.

"Concrete social practices manifest the institutional logics of capitalism, bureaucracy, and democracy. Inside each institution, the activities of individuals are symbolically defined by a historically developed vocabulary of motives and beliefs. Interests that cannot be converted to a particular vocabulary within a logic of action are difficult to express or to handle within that institutional sphere." (Alford and Friedland, 1985: 432).


Philip Gorski, for example, looks at variations in religion’s institutional location and structure as a determinant of its politicization (Gorski, 2007).

Identifying religion with “truth” in that text was, as Nancy Ammerman, among others, has pointed out, a mistake (Ammerman, 2005: 335). I cannot, in retrospect, really recall, but I suspect the reason we made that error was my focus on religion as an institutional order that hinged on believing in an unobservable reality.

Arendt says love is worldless because it is unconcerned with the what of the person, a creation of the who which is oblivious to what a person is, thereby she making human love into the analogue of Augustinian love, which cannot be concerned with the attributes of the particular person, only its divine source, the proper object of true love. Arendt relocates this divine “who” creation, this collective subject formation, in the domain of politics where one seeks to fashion an immortal collective subject, whereas human love is rendered private because it is the analogue of the Christian love. Ironically it is Heidegger, the anti-semit, who is the true Jew, the one who understands that love requires a mortal other, in which the particularity of each is preserved and necessary to that love, a love that, as Thomas Carlson has shown, makes the world, grounds its significance, provides the basis for the authenticity that is possible in one’s being towards death.

That which holds for the description of shades of light, tones of sound, nuances of smell, etc., also holds in exactly the same sense for the description of religious, aesthetic, and ethical ‘value feelings,’ he writes (Weber, 1975: 182).

Weber also equates a man’s erotic conquest of a woman with the “conquest of power” (Weber, 1958d: 345).
The implication, I think, is that what appear as conflicts with spheres where instrumental rationalities are dominant — between market and state on the one hand and religion on the other, for instance (Brubaker, 1984: 77) — are really still based in conflicting value rationalities. This may be consistent with Weber’s historical generalization that the “objectification of the power structure” or the “rationalization of coercion” is accompanied by a “flight into apolitical emotionalism” which includes eroticism, an “acosmic ethic of absolute goodness,” and mysticism (Weber, 1978: 601). The relation is not clear. Weber could be pointing to the consonance between impersonal, or personless, forms of action, each organized around an inaccessible, or invisible, value. Or he could be pointing to a substitution of a re-personalization, a hyper-subjectification, in response to depersonalization, the covering over of the god that once animated state and capitalism. This would be a substitution of a personalized world for a depersonalized one, or one that hinges on an illusionary having as against a political world where there are only power mechanisms, not a leader who wields power with an ethic of conviction towards a particular value. Whatever the specification, a sociological relation is posited between value spheres which can be read as more than just an escape from rationalization.

Weber sometimes elides the distinction between the two forms of possession. “Others seek to be possessed by God and to possess God, to be a bridegroom of the Virgin Mary, or to be the bride of the Savior.”(Weber, 1958c: 278). This is doubly curious not only because possession need not be identified with mysticism and because of the disjunction in the parallelism: a groom would possess and a bride be possessed.

There is an inner tension here: On the one hand, one must choose, on the other hand, one is chosen. The choice depends on a will without reason, a passion, a love affair. There is an intriguing parallel between the logic of a value sphere and the way in which Christians understand God’s grace. Overpowering institutional call and individual response, or taking up, of the calling. I cannot see the Christian parallel of a God whose bestowal of grace, whose call, is so powerful, that one cannot resist, and yet the individual who is understood to choose his faithlessness, his fallen condition through lack of faith. There are echoes of this absurd asymmetry in Weber’s polytheism – that one’s institutional salvation is not the result of one’s will, not an instrumental rationality, not a possessing, or even a “having,” while one’s lack of salvation is a result of the failure of one’s will.

Another reason this is so because of his understanding of the contradiction between political means and ethical ends in a democratic nation-state. The means of politics – violence, party organization and emotional manipulation – contravene whatever ethical commitments a political leader brings to the political arena.

We do not yet have much to say about the object, about the role of materiality, in the constitution of institutional logics, whether it is simply a site through which institutional logics operate or whether and in what way it is integral to their very operability (Friedland, 2013).

Thornton et. al. write: “The cornerstone institution connotes the root symbols and metaphors through which individuals and organizations perceive and categorize their activity and infuse it with meaning and value” (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury, 2012: 54). I think of institutional substance as fitting this description if by “value” they mean what the institution does as opposed to the value it has.

There is a clear institutional warrant for studying, as Boltanski and Thevenot do, the situational deployment of conventions (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2006).

They write: “The use of the term ‘institutional logic’ tends to imply way too much consensus in the field about what is going on and why and way too little concern over actors’ position, the creation of rules in the field that favor the more powerful over the less powerful, and the general use of power in strategic actions fields. In short, the relative and potentially oppositional positions of actors within the field are not well captured by the concept of institutional logic. The term fails to capture the ways in which different actors in different positions in the strategic action field will vary in their interpretation of events and respond to them from their own point of view” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012: 11).

Weber’s value spheres likewise were chock full of the kinds of “compromises” to which Boltanski and Thevenot refer. “In almost every important attitude of real human beings, the value-spheres cross and interpenetrate” (Weber, 1949: 18). There is, in human action, always an admixture of value rationalities; they come in impure fusions and mixtures. Values can recombine, thereby transforming their meaning and the practices associated with them. Erotic love, for example, moves from the eroticization of vassalage in the Christian Middle Ages to the intellectualism of salon culture in which “intersexual
conversation is valuable as a creative power” (Weber, 1958d: 346). Weber pointed to fusions in the alliances between “universalist mass religions” and art, each of which sought an emotional “religious experience,” or the unstable “fusion” of eroticism and mysticism (Weber, 1958d: 343, 349). Not only is the primary value not always distinct, but its capacity for re-composition with others affords paths of social action that may attenuate conflict, a point developed in Boltanski and Thévenot’s assertion of the situational availability of a multiplicity of “orders of worth” (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). These combinatorial possibilities allow for institutional rationalities to change, as, for example, in the combination of social justice and expected profit as criteria of socially responsible investment in the field of French asset management (Arjalies, 2010).

For Weber it was this life and this love that were central motors in the genesis of salvation religions (Weber, 1958). Love does pop up in other polities. In the market polity: “One succeeds through the strength of this desire, because one loves. Real life is what people want to acquire” (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 197). And in the civic polity: “The civic polity must do for humanity taken as a whole, as a body politic, what love never, or only rarely, allows persons to achieve in the order of individual relations” (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 117).

The interest of relativism is not that of the marketplace in that the former denies a common good, “the generality of worth,” and the sacrifices necessary to it. The interest of the market place is a desire to “obtain satisfaction,” which if it is to be mediated by the marketplace requires a detachment both from the goods that elicit this interest and from oneself and other people (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 197-200).