

Toward a General Theory of Institutional Autonomy*

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Institutional differentiation has been one of the central concerns of sociology since the days of Auguste Comte. However, the overarching tendency among institutionalists such as Durkheim or Spencer has been to treat the process of differentiation from a macro, “outside in” perspective. Missing from this analysis is how institutional differentiation occurs from the “inside out,” or through the efforts and struggles of individual and corporate actors. Despite the recent efforts of the “new institutionalism” to fill in this gap, a closer look at the literature will uncover the fact that (1) it has tended to conflate macro-level institutions and meso-level organizations and (2) this has led to a taken for granted approach to institutional dynamics. This article seeks to develop a general theory of institutional autonomy; autonomy is a function of the degree to which specialized corporate units are structurally and symbolically independent of other corporate units. It is argued herein that the process by which these “institutional entrepreneurs” become independent can explain how institutions become differentiated from the “inside out.” Moreover, this article offers five dimensions that can be operationalized, measuring the degree to which institutions are autonomous.

One of the oldest concepts in sociology is the idea of social differentiation. Early functional theorists (e.g., Comte [1851–1854] 1968; Durkheim 1893; Spencer 1874–1896) emphasized the process of institutional differentiation as central to societal evolution. As the population of a society grows, they all argued, institutional systems differentiate in order to sustain and integrate, in Spencer’s words, “the larger social mass.” Differentiation is, of course, a more pervasive phenomenon occurring at many levels of social reality—for example, at the level of roles (Turner 2001), positions (Fried 1967), identities (Stryker 1980), groups and subcultures (Homans 1950), organizations (Blau 1970), and resource niches (Hawley 1986). Still, there has been a consistent emphasis in theoretical sociology right up to the present on the dynamics of institutional differentiation, as is evidenced by the work of Parsons (1966), Parsons and Smelser (1956), Alexander and Colomy (1990), Eisenstadt (1964), Luhmann (1982, 1984), Lenski (2005), and Turner (1995). These more recent analyses have been decidedly macro in focus, often viewing institutional differentiation as a long-term trend in the evolution of society; and as such, most of these approaches have not explored the processes by which particular institutions become autonomous and, hence, differentiated from other institutional systems. Instead, emphasis has been on the causes of differentiation among institutions and/or the consequences of differentiation for other social dynamics. Indeed, there is an *ex cathedra* quality to these

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efforts, which have yet to develop a theory about *the processes by which individual and collective actors are able to increase the autonomy* of an institutional domain vis-à-vis other domains. What is lacking, then, is an inside out approach or an explanation of how each institution comes to be differentiated by strategic actions.

At first glance, the “new institutionalism” (Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Nee 2005) might be seen as offering an important corrective to the macro emphasis of theories loosely following in the early functionalist tradition. For, institutions are built from various types of corporate units, and so, an emphasis of organizations in their environments offers real potential for understanding how institutions become autonomous through the strategic actions of core organizations. Unfortunately, the new institutionalism tends to examine only organizations in their environments—typically, other organizations and/or their cultures. For sure, there is something to be learned by examining how organizations adapt to their environments, but the new institutionalism tends to conflate meso-level organizations with macro-level institutional systems (Jepperson 1991; Meyer and Rowan 1977; North 1990). To bring out the potential of a synthesis between the older institutionalism of functional and evolutionary theorizing and the newer organizational approaches to institutionalism, further theorizing is required. It becomes necessary to understand how individual and corporate actors are able to forge relations among corporate units integrated by distinctive cultural systems that establish varying degrees of autonomy from other sets of culturally mediated relations among corporate units marking the boundaries of other institutional systems.

The goal of this article, then, is to offer some tentative generalizations on the dynamics increasing or decreasing institutional autonomy. For, in the end, institutional differentiation cannot occur without the processes increasing institutional autonomy. Institutional differentiation is, therefore, a function of the number of distinctive institutional systems and their degree of autonomy from each other. Autonomy, then, is a function of *the degree to which sets of specialized corporate actors are structurally and symbolically independent of other sets of corporate actors*. How, then, are actors able to generate this autonomy and, thereby, cause institutional differentiation?

ELEMENTS OF INSTITUTIONAL SYSTEMS

Institutions are one of the basic building blocks of all societies, and as societies have grown in scale and complexity, they have done so by differentiating institutional subsystems—e.g., kinship, religion, polity, law, economy, education, medicine, media, art, and perhaps sports. Institutions are macro-structures because they generally affect all individual and collective actors in a society and resolve fundamental problems of adaptation. In reviewing the elements of institutions, the more analytical statements will be illustrated by introducing examples from law as an institutional system. Law is a useful case because its emergence as an autonomous institutional system is comparatively recent in human evolutionary history and because its degree of autonomy varies considerably across societies.

Institutions as Adaptive Structures

The first element of institutions posited above is that they are adaptive responses to exigencies faced by all societies. These exigencies can be endogenous—such as resource scarcity (Boserup 1965), population pressures (Malthus [1798] 1926), or crises

that produce problems of meaning (Weber 1922)—or exogenous—such as climatic change (Fagan 2004) or intersocietal conflict (Gat 2006). These problems produce *selection pressures*, which, in turn, push individuals and corporate units to make choices—sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously—that, when aggregated, lead to the successful reduction of selection pressures and growth in institutional domains, or failure and the potential weakening of the society (Johnson and Earle 2000).

Before using law to undergird this discussion, we must first answer why law exists: What types of historical exigencies lead to the emergence and growth of a legal institution that is an adaptation to these environmental problems? The answer to this question, admittedly, is complicated, but can be summarized to make the overarching point: based on anthropological, archaeological, and sociological evidence, law appears to, in its most nascent and complex forms, deal with problems of conflict resolution and notions of justice (Hoebel 1973; Redfield 1967). It is proposed, then, that *the greater the degree to which a legal institution is autonomous, the greater the degree to which it is the sole institution addressing questions of internal societal conflict and justice*. However, in its infancy law lacks autonomy—inseparable first from the kinship institution that dominates hunter/gatherer life (Maryanski and Turner 1992; Service 1962), later, it comes to be deeply intertwined with the political and religious institutions. With growth in population size and density, expanded levels of production, and increased rates of social exchange, law becomes an increasingly autonomous institution easing disintegrative (selection) pressures by providing a nonviolent arena for conflict resolution (Black 1976) and regulation of transactions (Turner 1980). Thus the more effective the legal system, the more a society can adapt to internal conflict, regulate exchanges in an orderly and nonviolent manner, and acculturate different categoric units—e.g., the various diffuse groups categorized by different markers such as ethnicity, gender, or occupation—and the more likely a legal institution, and especially its constituent actors, will become autonomous.

The former Soviet Union provides a more recent example demonstrating the importance of law, regardless of its level of autonomy. In the early stages of statecraft, Lenin ([1917] 1976) and his colleagues felt law, being part of the superstructure, was a historically specific—i.e., capitalist—institution built solely to protect the owners of private property that they sought to abolish (see also Marx [1867] 1967). The consequences of this decision resulted in confusion, uncertainty in economic and social transactions, and, ultimately, the “discovery” of so-called socialist law that was essentially Western law with a few additions and subtractions (Berman 1955). It can be shown that conflicts between actors is normal in any and all societies, and it has generally been the legal institution—even in the simplest societies (Bohannan 1967; Hoebel 1973)—that has served as an adaptive response to conflicts that cannot be resolved in other institutional domains.

Social Actors and Institutions

Actors. Social actors are (1) individuals occupying roles and statuses and (2) corporate bodies that organize statuses and roles into goal-oriented units. Institutions are important for both types of actors because they provide the structural and cultural contexts in which actors can assign meaning to their actions and attitudes as well as other actors'. Furthermore, institutions serve as the arenas in which actors struggle and compete for access to resources. Finally, institutions act as “storehouses” of

resources that orient action by providing the types of goals toward which people strive, the potential means with which to pursue these goals and interests, and the mechanisms of social control that constrain their behavior and others’.

Thus, institutions are the paramount structures facilitating and constraining action, goal setting, and decision making. Two key elements allow institutions to constrain and facilitate action and attitudes: the positions they have access to and the resources that guide their behavior. Both positions and resources have a three-fold function: (1) they provide the blueprints for action, interaction, goal-setting, and decision making; (2) they provide the material for constructing a system of authority that affords some actors more freedom in their actions than others—which accounts for both innovation and rigidification; and (3) they are mechanisms of social control.

Horizontal and Vertical Positions. Positions, in terms of individual and corporate actors, have horizontal and vertical dimensions. Horizontal dimensions refer to the *technical* division of labor, or the interdependence built between role-players whose functions complement each other (Durkheim 1893). Vertical dimensions are related to the *social* division of labor, or the organization of individual positions and corporate units within a status hierarchy (Blau 1977). Thus, actors’ positions along the horizontal dimension denote their role or function in terms of other institutional actors, while the vertical dimension represents their relative position in relationship to valued institutional resources. For instance, lawyers can be found on a horizontal dimension according to their relationship to other lawyers, clients, and jurists, while also being uniquely situated vertically in terms of each lawyer’s status in relation to jurists, clients, and, more importantly, other lawyers. This same example can be extrapolated to a law firm or a law school, in which some are ranked higher and produce more prestige than others, while being divided horizontally according to the types of law they specialize in litigating or teaching.

Actors and Autonomy. Simply put, the greater the autonomy of an institution, the greater the degree to which the horizontal and vertical positions—both individual and corporate—will be discrete. Lawyers, judges, and clients become role and status positions unique to autonomous legal systems, as do law schools, law offices, and courthouses. While the emergence of a legal profession has its roots in ancient states such as Mesopotamia (Postgate 2003) and China (Chang 1983), an independent legal profession—one devoted to the problems, intellectual endeavors, and development of judicial questions (Weber 1967)—does not begin to appear until Rome (Harries 1999; Kunkel 1966), with its full expression emerging out of the early European universities (Berman 1983).¹ Implicitly, then, selection criteria for access to role positions and resource niches becomes more and more governed by legal actors and associations; the behaviors, goals, and decision-making processes of individual and corporate actors filling these positions become embedded and reproduced within the themes and texts of the legal institution (Luhmann 2004); and a corporate group—labeled here as an institutional entrepreneur—gains a monopoly over the legitimate authority to develop, apply, disseminate, and transmit its practices and knowledge (Freidson 1994).

¹Incidentally, once an institution becomes autonomous in one location, the gradual process of autonomy is mitigated through diffusion. Similarly, John Meyer (1987) notes that the nation-state, arduously constructed, becomes a “cultural blueprint” that can be borrowed, modified, and adapted by other polities once it exists and can become diffuse.

It must be remembered, though, that autonomy is a variable, reversible process, which can be demonstrated by taking a cursory look at contemporary legal systems. In Iran, for example, lawyers and jurists are selected and act in accordance with the Koran and religious principles first and legal principles second—legal action continues to be framed in terms of morality rather than justice (Akhavi 1992; Schirazi 1997). The former Soviet Union mirrors modern Iran in that the legal system was lacking autonomy and, as such, lawyers and judges oriented their actions toward the polity and party loyalty first and ideals of justice second (Berman 1968). It is possible to compare these examples to either the contemporary United States (Chayes 1988) or Israel (Baker 1968; Barak 2000), where lawyers and jurists, by constitutional decree and specialized training, are independent; are selected through particular legal criteria; are trained in legal universities devoted to the resolution of conflict and the establishment of justice; and orient their behavior in legalistic ways more often than other ways (Carlin 1980; Hirschfield 1965).²

Material and Symbolic Resources

Institutions are also composed of material and symbolic resources that are selected from the larger sociocultural warehouse (Swidler 1986). General resources include power, prestige, and wealth, all of which are both the goals that orient actors' interests as well as the means to achieving these goals (Parsons 1990; Weber 1978). Other resources, however, have important effects on behavior, goals, and decisions of individual and corporate actors. Material resources, such as the instruments or tools needed to reproduce institutional roles, uniforms or emblems that define the role-player, and buildings that differentiate the physical and temporal space all act as resources that are used in the reproduction of institutional life (Goffman 1961). Less tangibly, patterned actions and scripts, institutional norms, and other modes of behavior are resources that simplify interaction, thus ensuring its regular success, while also constraining the actors' ability to infinitely innovate (Goffman 1959).

Symbolic resources include value sets providing preference hierarchies, notions of good and bad, right and wrong; ideologies that explain present events, justify past events, and orient actors to the future; totems that define the sacred elements of institutional life (Durkheim 1912); texts and themes, both of which naturally limit the types and styles of interaction by selecting some forms of language/interaction and ignoring others (Luhmann 1984); and finally, some symbolic generalized medium of exchange that allows institutional actors to exchange with each other, over great social and geographical distance, as well as with noninstitutional actors (Parsons 1951; Simmel 1907).³ All of these resources facilitate behavior because they are the cultural "tools" necessary for reproduction of institutional operations as well as the things that people strive for; they are also constraining factors because some resources are selected from the environment, and others are not: this means that some resources are available and others are not. Moreover, some resources must

²To be sure, not all judges all the time are guided by ideals of justice because law, like all other institutions, can never be completely or truly autonomous. Rather, it varies and so do the actors' orientations.

³It should be noted that I do not assume that a value-system exists in a given institution, or for that matter, any monolithic symbolic set. Typically, there is a dominant value-system that actors have uneven access to, and are unevenly committed to—which is why institutions do not simply rely on normative commitment to establish and maintain social control. As Bourdieu has correctly argued, institutions are arenas of struggle, predominantly over the "legitimate vision of reality."

be procured from other institutions—i.e., all institutions must seek material subsistence from the economy (Parsons and Smelser 1956)—which necessarily limits their authority and independence.

Resources and Autonomy

In terms of institutional autonomy, it is proposed that the greater the degree to which an institution is autonomous, the greater is the degree to which certain material and symbolic resources will be institutionally distinct. Again, legal institutions can provide some concrete illustrations. As the legal institution becomes autonomous, the texts and themes (Luhmann 2004), the methods, explanations, justifications, and orientations of legal actors (Unger 1976), and the buildings, uniforms, and symbology become distinct and recognizable by most members of society as being “legal resources.” For instance, in the United States the robe and gavel come to represent the judge as a generalizable role; the Constitution and Bill of Rights come to symbolize the “rule of law”; and images like “blind lady justice” and “scales” come to represent the ideal of justice.

In less autonomous legal institutions, these symbols, themes, and buildings are less clearly delineated. In ancient Mesopotamia, for example, cases were adjudicated either in the palace, the temple, or before the local neighborhood assembly (Postgate 2003); moreover, legal “codes,” such as the famous dictate of Hammurabi, are symbols of the divine right to kingship and not guidelines or instructions for jurists (Yoffee 2005); and finally, in most of the dynasties—except during the dominance of Babylon (2000 B.C.E.)—there were no professional judges, but rather ephemeral roles that were sometimes filled by priests, other times by elders or local governors, and still other times filled by the king himself (Potts 1997; Tadmor 1986). With Rome and then, later, the medieval church, lawyers and jurists became increasingly distinct, full-time actors concerned with law and not so much religious or political matters (Berman 1983).

THE ORIGINS OF INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY

Institutional autonomy is a sociocultural evolutionary process; as such, the conditions that propel institutional autonomy can be delineated. These conditions are general forces that appear to exist in all societies and are necessary for the differentiation and autonomy of institutions. As noted above, other conditions are socially and historically specific and, as such, would require a different formal of explication. These more specific elements should not be seen as any less important, but rather produce the intricacies and nuances of everyday social life that a general theory can rarely capture.

Macro Dynamics

The most basic force preventing or facilitating institutional development is population growth and density or the lack thereof. Without this initial force, selection pressures stemming from resource production and distribution or conflict are not likely to emerge. Thus over the long span of social evolution, nearly 95 percent of all humans have lived in small hunter-gatherer groups, governed by kinship organization (Service 1962). However, as populations grow, resource scarcity becomes salient, and solutions are sought. Anthropological evidence appears to point to segmentation

as the earliest solution to the problems caused by population: when food became scarce or conflicts between people or families became too much to bear, larger groups would simply disband and find a new residence (Sutton and Anderson 2004).

However, societal fission is an acceptable solution only where space is plentiful. When societies become geographically and/or militarily circumscribed, however, population pressures become real exigencies that require sociocultural innovation rather than a reduction of existing structural and cultural formations (Carneiro 1970). The earliest solutions to population pressures combined with geographic circumscription are the elaboration of the polity, first as chiefdoms and then as early administrative states. Political actors begin to set uniquely political goals, acquire distinct political tasks, and begin to structurally—in terms of a growing administration and hierarchy of authority—and symbolically become independent as their roles become indispensable to the masses. Autonomous polities, despite their best efforts, tend to become progressive forces (Eisenstadt 1963), encouraging the growth of autonomy in other institutions and beginning the long evolutionary trend of institutional differentiation.

While population size and density, geographic circumscription, and emergent political autonomy are key variables, a fourth variable deserves as much attention: *economic surplus*. Economic surplus feeds back on population size, allowing growth in population, as well as supporting the emergence of urban populations that are inherently dense. Moreover, access to the economic surplus intensifies the “progressive” qualities of the polity. On the one hand, the growing disparity between those who appropriate the surplus and those who contribute to it requires some type of ideological justification. In early societies, legitimacy was derived from the religious institution, while in contemporary societies it is an autonomous legal institution that provides legitimacy. In either case, the polity transfers resources to these institutions, providing support for the emergence of aspiring institutional entrepreneurs. On the other hand, the desire for more economic resources on the part of the political entrepreneurial class, when coupled with a growing population and, therefore, a potential for instability, leads polities to push for economic innovation, which can also have the unintended consequence of spurring on growth in economic autonomy.

While this discussion has looked closely at the macro forces responsible for the *historical* evolution of institutional autonomy, they are still relevant conditions for contemporary analyses. Wherever population size and density are limited; where political autonomy is unstable, nonexistent, or overly coercive; or the economic surplus is (1) underdeveloped or (2) overly centralized, institutional autonomy is likely to be low in all institutions except, perhaps, the kinship, political, and religious institutions.

Micro Dynamics

The most important force on the micro level conditioning the emergence of institutional autonomy resides in an “institutional entrepreneur,” or corporate units acting purposively to secure their own independence in their practices, access to resources to maintain that independence, and control over the transmission of their knowledge and practices to future members (Eisenstadt 1980). Thus, groups with sole access to key types of knowledge expressed through distinct practices—such as writing (Goody 1986)—have historically been the most important engineers of autonomous institutions. The more valuable—real or perceived—the knowledge and practices, the greater is their potential power and influence over the society and its members. To be sure, as there are six universal institutions, and a few more contemporary ones,

certain types of knowledge have been historically privileged over others. For example, nascent autonomous polities have always emerged around leaders and their inner circles, who have demonstrated unique skill in mobilizing social power to wage wars, build massive monuments or public works, energize the community, and/or have seemingly brought or ensured economic prosperity. Other institutions have similar stories: law became autonomous through the efforts of a growing legal profession that monopolized the production and distribution of justice and conflict resolution; the economy has been developed through corporate, merchant, and entrepreneurial monopolization of the production and distribution of capital and material subsistence; more contemporarily, doctors monopolized the production and distribution of health care and medicine (Starr 1982).⁴

Thus, wherever entrepreneurial carrier groups seek to, and successfully, organize the material and symbolic resources necessary to produce and distribute certain goods and services, the probability of institutional autonomy increases. However, the monopolization of key goods and services is not enough for entrepreneurs to become structurally and symbolically independent. Institutional entrepreneurs must also find and obtain independent bases of resources to sustain and expand their operations, otherwise they will remain dependent upon their patrons—who are, in most cases, extant elites. If an entrepreneurial unit is capable of monopolizing its practices and knowledge and finding independent bases of resources, the probability that it can become structurally and symbolically independent, and therefore the level of institutional autonomy, increases.

A final step in the process involves the construction of institutional space and the accessibility of institutional roles. On the one hand, entrepreneurs must erect their own system of authority and status hierarchy, as well as institute some mechanisms of social control. On the other hand, this system of authority is useless unless a significant proportion of society find the goods and services offered by the entrepreneurs valued and desirable. Thus, entrepreneurs begin as differentiated units within an extant institution. As their knowledge and practices grow more complex, the entrepreneurs' patrons become increasingly dependent upon the knowledge and practices offered by them; as long as the entrepreneurs are dependent upon the elites for sustenance, institutional autonomy will remain quite low. If, however, the entrepreneurial unit is successful in finding other social strata interested in its goods and services—and, of course, the extant elites cannot suppress this search—it can potentially obtain a new resource base(s) that gradually provides independence. The greater the proportion of the population that (1) finds the goods and services offered by institutional entrepreneurs desirable and (2) can afford to purchase—or are willing to purchase—these goods and services, the more structurally and symbolically independent the entrepreneurs.

Let's briefly look at how this plays out in a legal institution. Lawyers, in their earliest form, have tended to differentiate out of priesthoods for two reasons. First, priests have typically monopolized writing, which is a precondition for the development of an autonomous legal institution. Second, and closely related, one of the most important functions of priest-scribes has been to "codify" law for the king and for the deity. In societies such as Mesopotamia or Rome, lawyers were never really independent of the political or religious institutions as "positive" law had not yet been invented and divine law was still paramount to any other legal theory.

⁴I use the term "monopoly" much like Weber: it does not imply total possession, but rather majority possession.

During the Middle Ages in Europe, law became increasingly important in the competition between the Catholic Church, the various royal houses, the aristocracy, and the growing merchant middle class (Berman 1983). Within this context, lawyers and jurists found their services, as well as their knowledge and practices, becoming valued and desired by multiple status groups and began to procure alternative sources of sustenance. Finally, with the American Constitution and French Enlightenment philosophy, law had a firm theoretical basis for autonomy. The autonomous legal institution emerged out of the fact that law became a service available and desired by people other than the upper strata; it became the legitimate “weapon” used in kinship conflicts, economic exchanges, and political battles. As such, lawyers became structurally and symbolically independent actors who had carved out an autonomous legal institution that provided the diffuse generalized role “client” to a significant proportion of people, complete with the expectations and obligations attached to this role within the context of a relatively discrete system of authority and sanctioned by distinct mechanisms of social control.

DIMENSIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY

Variation in autonomy can have important affects on actors embedded within the institution because it is likely to alter the larger structure that provides the environment in which actions are planned, choices are made, and goals are set. Thus, measuring the variance in institutional autonomy has some important advantages. First, it allows for the comparison of particular institutions across societies at a given time or historically, and how this affects the structure of those societies. For example, one could look at the level of autonomy in political institutions across various historical states and note how increases or decreases in autonomy affected the expansion or contraction of other institutions. Second, variance can occur within a given institution, having important intra-societal affects. The U.S. Supreme Court symbolized the growing autonomy of the legal institution when Justice Marshall used judicial review in 1803 (see *Marbury v. Madison*), effectively striking down legislation for the first time in the history of law (Smith 1996); 30 years later, a change in personnel (enter Justice Taney), as well as a change in the level of autonomy in other U.S. institutions, reduced the level of autonomy in the legal institution, which was subsequently restored to much greater levels than ever before during the Warren Court (Irons 1999). Thus, autonomy is strongly related to the personnel within the institution, the personnel in extrainstitutional positions, and other social forces—the point being, autonomy is a *tenuous* process, characterized by *struggle* between and within groups. Finally, the variation in autonomy can be used to offer descriptive analyses of single states or political units, noting which institutions are more autonomous than others, and then explaining what impact this has on the structure and organization of the given society.

Five dimensions of institutional autonomy are delineated below. These are all interconnected and thus the higher the values for all of them, the greater the degree of institutional autonomy. However, they are independent of each other, allowing for uneven development of institutional autonomy; changes in any one of them will have different effects on the way autonomy looks. The first three are directly related to the relationships between positions within the institution: in many ways, institutions are simply horizontal and vertical networks of individual and corporate actors. The other two dimensions are key to differentiating institutions from organizations because they deal with symbolic systems.

Monopolization and Legitimation

The *monopolization* of the material and symbolic resources necessary to reproduce an institutional core is deeply entwined with the level of legitimacy conferred on a group. Nearly all carrier groups must secure the legitimacy of elites and nonelites, using this leverage to marginalize their competition. Legitimacy becomes easiest to secure when a carrier group monopolizes certain goods and services that are valued and desired by other groups, thus gaining a power-dependence advantage (Emerson 1962; Blau 1964). Indeed, history is littered with the remains of struggles and conflicts between carrier groups vying for scarce positions, with the winning group most effectively securing legitimacy and monopolizing their practices and knowledge. It is proposed, then, that *the greater is the degree to which access, production, distribution, and development of institutional resources are monopolized by a particular corporate or individual actor, the greater is the likelihood that elite and nonelite actors will be dependent upon the goods and services provided by the monopolizing group, which, in turn, increases the likelihood that this group will gain legitimate authority over these resources and, therefore, independence in their practices and knowledge.*⁵

Breadth

Tilly (2007), in his analysis of democracy, emphasizes that the level of democracy is determined by the relationship between the state and groups in civil society—that is, do people feel committed to their “citizen” role and act as such, or is citizenship, as a role, limited to certain groups of people? This generalization can be extended to the analysis of dynamics of all institutions. Quite simply, the construction of elite roles requires counter-roles, or those who recognize elites’ legitimate claims and who exchange intangible resources like commitment and loyalty, as well as more tangible resources like material wealth, with elites. All of these role positions indicate an abstract, indirect system of exchange that sustains a distinct system of authority while providing those in subordinate positions with goods and services that satisfy their needs and interests. Thus, *breadth* reflects the degree to which the symbolic and structural system of an institution structures behaviors and orients these behaviors toward the values, beliefs, and norms of a given institutional domain.⁶ The key here is that most people, even those actively rejecting the role, know and understand the basic general duties and expectations of the role in relationship to some other diffuse and generalized counter-role. The second proposition can be derived from this discussion: *the larger is the number of individual and corporate actors socialized in generalized status-role sets within an institutionalized domain, the greater is the degree to which an institution will be autonomous.*

It is worth noting the relationship between these first two propositions. The generalized status-role sets found in the first proposition are often a result of incumbents’ capacity to monopolize certain goods and services. For example, patients only

⁵Again, autonomy is variable. In the United States, for example, judges are not selected by other judges or lawyers, but rather by politicians. However, in the Israeli legal system, a group of lawyers and extant judges select new members. The key is that it is variable, and autonomy is not simply determined and reflected by one dynamic, but by the additive properties of all five.

⁶To be sure, not all members of a society will (1) actively or have the ability to play a role such as “citizen,” (2) be motivated or committed to the role in question, or (c) be aware of the duties. Moreover, rejection, rebellion, or illegitimate role-playing are all potential patterns of action, but even these often follow some type of proscribed pattern of norms (Merton 1938).

become patients when doctors are clearly defined, as are their actions and obligations. The roles become diffuse for two reasons. First, the elites that grant legitimacy to the doctors, their own authority to embed doctor-patient exchanges into the general socialization of commoners, making it “normal” to seek “expert advice” (Starr 1982). This occurs because doctors and other elites enter into worthwhile exchange. On one hand, elites vouch for doctors, providing them with sufficient resources to beat the competition, while on the other hand, doctors offer a good and service invaluable to elites: care that prolongs the life and health of its citizen, keeping them happy and helping to sustain the social order. Second, as Collins (2004) emphasizes, repeated exchanges produce positive affect, and thus positive interactions with doctors are more likely to produce further interactions and cause the diffusion, by word of mouth, of the beliefs associated with the doctor-patient status-role set.

Conflict-Competition

A third dimension addresses questions of conflict and struggle. Stability and institutional continuity depend on conflict being institutionalized in terms of legitimate rules of engagement and appropriate channels for conflict resolution. Institutions are arenas of conflict because they organize and (unevenly) distribute valued resources, including positions that have access to these resources, thus autonomy is a function of the degree to which conflict can be institutionalized within the institutional core. Formal channels for grievances must exist, status conflicts and political maneuvering are delimited means that can be employed in these struggles, and even efforts to change the core or usurp the privilege of the dominant groups in the core do not seek to destroy the structure of the institutional core, but gain control of it. The third proposition states that *the more conflict is institutionalized into competition among actors within an institutional domain, the greater is the level of institutional autonomy.*

Symbolic Closure

Symbolic closure, or the degree to which an institution has sets of discrete symbols or is organized into a distinctive cultural system, is a key dimension of institutional autonomy. The ancient Hebrews, for instance, had a religious system that doubled as a legal and educational system, as well as interacted in important ways with the political system—at least when they composed a political territory (Falk 1964); the Hebrew Bible, or the Torah, was the text that structured and symbolized all of these institutions. The core of the religious institution was bounded more so than the other institutions and, as such, law, education, and in many ways politics, were beholden to religious values, beliefs, and norms. Essentially, the religious core was symbolically bound, while other institutions that were embedded within the religious environment were less bound. Law was given in Leviticus; education was the primary function of the *shul* (which has become the synagogue in modern Jewish communities), where adult male Jews would learn to read and study the Torah; and the kings all depended upon theocratic legitimacy (Liverani 2005).

Autonomy is, of course, never “total”; there will always be actors, organizations, buildings, and symbols that are “borrowed” from or imposed by other institutional domains. For instance, in most capitalist societies the business suit is both a material and symbolic resource denoting the economic institution, but has become a pervasive form of “professional” attire in other institutional domains. Moreover, the symbols

and structure of polity often penetrate other institutional domains, thereby limiting potential autonomy attainable. Indeed, economy and polity are often important arenas of struggle, and in their struggles they also have important effects on the autonomy of other institutions. Yet, this situation is neither constant nor guaranteed. Rather, the polity's influence over the legal system, for example, can fluctuate based on a number of factors. It would be difficult to argue that the Warren Court was being controlled or was subordinate to the polity or the economic system. Rather, the justices on that court were determined to change the social structure around them, often at the behest of other institutional domains and their constituent actors. Thus a fourth proposition can be derived: *the greater the degree to which an institution is symbolically bounded, the greater the level of institutional autonomy.*

Symbolic Media and Marketplace Dynamics

Talcott Parsons (1951) was perhaps the most important advocate of the concept *generalized symbolic media of exchange* (see also Luhmann 1982; Simmel 1907). Parsons recognized that institutions are marketplaces of social exchange, but with the differentiation of society generalized symbolic media of exchange must emerge to reduce uncertainty and risk while facilitating a myriad of exchanges. For Parsons, money is one symbolic medium utilized as the primary mechanism of exchange in a symbolically bounded economy. And while money often penetrates other institutional domains, other institutions that become symbolically closed or bounded develop additional media of exchange. These media further reinforce the symbolic and structural boundedness of the institution by limiting the types of exchange within a domain as well as between institutional domains, the styles in which these exchanges can take place, and the appropriate return on the exchange (Luhmann 1984).

This point can be further illustrated using the autonomous legal institution, which typically uses *justice* as its medium of exchange (Chayes 1988; Lloyd 1964). Justice is universally desired in all societies, regardless of the variation in terms of what justice means and how it is procured. As society becomes increasingly complex and conflicts and their resolution grow concomitantly, the legal institution increasingly becomes the central location for conflict resolution. As such, it “deals” in justice as defined by the social milieu. In a highly differentiated society, an autonomous legal institution exchanges justice for other media like money—through clients using the legal system to establish or procure justice—or power—through the polity legitimating an independent judiciary as being an equal, but separate, branch and providing the coercive force necessary to back legal decisions.

It also shapes the themes, texts, and interactions between those cognitively oriented toward the legal institution (Luhmann 2004). Because justice becomes a medium of exchange, it is a highly valued resource that is contested and struggled for. This implies that its meaning will often be finitely different depending upon the faction or strata one belongs to. However, when legal roles become generalized and diffuse, a group of actors monopolize legal resources and conflict resolution, and what justice means becomes institutionalized and bound, the legal institution will likely become autonomous, and interactions within the institution and with other institutions will involve “justice.” This, however, does not devalue the importance of generalized media, but rather it explicates its value because control over the production and distribution of the medium is the goal of groups, and not its destruction. Thus our fifth proposition can be derived: *the greater the degree to which the generalized medium of exchange facilitating and constraining institutional interchanges and institution-specific social exchange, the greater the degree to which an institution will be autonomous.*

CONCLUSION

The goal of this article was to begin to set forth a theory that explained the process of institutional differentiation—a process central to institutional analysis—from the “inside out.” It was argued that institutional autonomy is a function of *the degree to which sets of specialized corporate actors are structurally and symbolically independent of other sets of corporate actors*; it is the process by which these corporate actors, labeled above as institutional entrepreneurs, struggle to become structurally and symbolically independent that leads to institutional autonomy and, therefore, institutional differentiation. This process was framed in an evolutionary argument, noting that institutions were adaptive responses composed of congeries of individual and corporate actors who innovated in the face of selection pressures that emerged from the unique feedback loop generated when population pressures are combined with geographic circumscription, pushing innovation to prevent collapse. In some cases, innovation resulted in the production of an economic surplus that could become appropriated in the center, while also closing the loop by allowing populations to continue to grow and, therefore, creating intensified selection pressures.

The groups that successfully innovate, or that could appropriate others’ innovations, become the institutional entrepreneurs responsible for carving out autonomous institutional space. As entrepreneurs, these corporate units desire independence in their practices, seek alternative and independent bases of resources in which to sustain their activities, and attempt to further develop their knowledge and practices in order to become indispensable to other social groups in hopes of gaining a power-dependence advantage. If a group can successfully monopolize its knowledge and practices, become indispensable to other groups, and obtain alternative resource bases it can potentially carve out autonomous institutional space.

Thus, the theory of institutional autonomy—developed thus far—revolves around the following generalizations:

- (1) Institutional autonomy is a positive function of:
 - (a) The degree to which a corporate group finds alternative or independent bases of resources, which is a positive function of (1) the degree to which access, production, distribution, and development of institutional resources are monopolized by a particular corporate or individual actor and (2) the degree to which this monopoly makes this group indispensable to elite and nonelite actors.
 - (b) The number of individual and corporate actors socialized in generalized status-role sets within an institutionalized domain.
 - (c) The level to which conflict is institutionalized into competition among actors within an institutional domain.
 - (d) The degree to which an institution is symbolically bounded.
 - (e) The degree to which a generalized symbolic medium of exchange distinct to a given institution facilitates and constrains institutional interchanges and institution-specific social exchange.

Proposition 1.a asserts that institutional autonomy will increase first with the successful transformation of a corporate group into an entrepreneur, which includes monopolizing practices and knowledge that produce resources that are valued and desired by other actors and, that, in turn, uses this monopoly to become indispensable to other actors. Indispensability makes entrepreneurs difficult to suppress

because elites need entrepreneurial goods and services to maintain legitimacy and prevent disruptions in production, distribution, and regulation. The typical solution is to work out some type of power sharing arrangement that makes both the elites and entrepreneurs dependent upon each other. Nevertheless, the existence of specialists implies differentiation has begun as lawyers or doctors do become associated with law and medicine respectively.

Proposition 1.b indicates that it is imperative that entrepreneurs find ways to make their goods and services useful and affordable to social strata other than elites if they are to become independent and succeed in carving out autonomous institutional space. Thus, the more actors who are socialized and occupy—or, could occupy given the appropriate situation—generalized institutional status-role sets, the more penetrating are the values, beliefs, and norms of the entrepreneurial unit. The effect is two-fold. On the one hand, symbolic penetration leads to cognitive orientation and the acceptance of the entrepreneur's vision of reality (Bourdieu 1977). On the other hand, when more people believe in the entrepreneur's vision of reality and desire its goods and services, the indispensability of the specialist increases, as does its structural independence. To further strengthen the entrepreneur's claim to legitimacy, it must find ways to reduce conflict while promoting competition within the institutional domain. This has the effect of stabilizing social relations as well as legitimizing positions of authority and mechanisms of social control.

Finally, propositions 1.d and 1.e speak to symbolic independence. On the one hand, entrepreneurs must monopolize institutionally specific symbols that demarcate the boundaries between institutional activities and extrainstitutional activities. Buildings become drenched in the symbology of the group, uniforms and emblems differentiate institutional actors from extrainstitutional actors, instruments and tools become diffuse social objects delineating institutional activities, and totems become sanctified. Symbolic boundedness means institutional space, time, and social relations have gained a degree of discreteness. The final step is to monopolize the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of a generalized symbolic medium that facilitates and constrains social interactions and exchanges with the institutional domain as well as between institutional domains. The greater the values of these five dimensions, the greater the level of institutional autonomy; having five independent, yet interrelated, dimensions, however, leaves ample room for variation, uneven differentiation, and incomplete projects of institutional autonomy.

The theoretical examination posited above is the first step taken in constructing a general theory of institutional autonomy. Future analyses will have to provide a formalized evolutionary model that is measured against historical cases to test its reliability. Moreover, the consequences resulting from increases or decreases in institutional autonomy will need to be elucidated. Nevertheless, the foundation has been laid out in the theoretical proposition offered above and the general discussion of the elements of institutions and the evolutionary forces compelling the growth of institutional autonomy and differentiation.

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