

# Why Institutional Theory Cannot Be Critical

Hugh Willmott<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The title is intentionally provocative. Institutional theory can, of course, be critical. It *is* critical of theories that are insufficiently attentive to how human behavior becomes institutionalized. Notably, institutional theory is critical of variants of rationalist analysis that include, as noted by Kamal Munir (2014), orthodox economics. By attending to the social embeddedness of action, institutional theory delivers an antidote to analyses based on objectivist ontology that produce an often mathematicized analysis of objectivated outcomes (Lawson, 2013). Whether in its “realist” or more “phenomenological” variants (Meyer, 2008), institutionalist analysis has addressed *inter alia* how actors’ beliefs and actions are conditioned within and by institutions; how institutions are created and transformed by (entrepreneurial) actors; and how forms of institutionalization can meet with resistance.

Influenced by the arguments of *verstehen*,<sup>1</sup> institutional theory affirms the central role of understanding, configured in complexes of meaning, in the constitution of the social world. It is therefore capable of debunking objectivism by showing how, for example, “social institutions are changed in order to bring them into conformity with already existing theories” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 145), such as neo-classical economics. There are, however, limits to institutional theory’s powers of critical illumination. One major blind spot, identified by Munir (2014), is a tendency, when examining “how practices become legitimate or how institutions influence our actions,” to “accept organizational hierarchies and [take] their inherent power hierarchies as given” (p. 90). This blinkeredness is symptomatic of the priority given by institutional theory to exploring the effects of complexes of meaning (e.g., the significance of institutionalized myths and logics), to the comparative neglect, or trivial consideration, of the role of power in establishing and naturalizing such meaning within relations of domination and oppression (Cooper, Ezzamel, & Willmott, 2008; Willmott, 2013b).

In a comprehensive review of the relationship of institutional analysis and power, Lawrence (2008) observes that “there has been little recognition . . . of the *fundamental* role of power” (p. 171, emphasis added). The conservatism of institutional theory, to which Lawrence points, is helpfully linked by Clegg (2010) to its “origins in sociological functionalism” (p. 5). The conservative pedigree of institutional

theory is affirmed and compounded by a (neo-positivist) inclination to assume that objects of research can be captured by, or mirrored in, its analysis (Rorty, 1981). A constructionist ontology is domesticated by a neo-positivist epistemology that tends to treat its objects of investigation as givens, rather than as media of domination. Institutional theory thereby precludes consideration of how its objects of investigation can be adequately researched without reference to asymmetries of power in processes of institutionalization. As a consequence, the critical credentials of institutional theory are confined to its rejection of an empirically realist ontology and the associated debunking of analysis that abstracts actors and actions from their embeddedness in, and articulation of, “institutional structures” (Meyer, 2008, p. 793). Power relations may occasionally be invoked as a relevant focus or concept of analysis (e.g., Lawrence, 2008; Zald & Lounsbury, 2010), but their presence and significance is dis-associated from structures of domination and oppression. Meyer (2008), for example, conceives of power exclusively in its “first dimension” (Lukes, 1974/2005) where it is conceived as a possession of actors overtly deployed to fulfill their preferences (e.g., in establishing or maintaining particular institutions) by overcoming the resistance of others. Referring to more phenomenological versions of institutionalism, (Meyer, 2008, p. 799) asserts that they “do not take issue with the argument that many institutionalized patterns may directly reflect the power and interest of dominant states or other organizations.” However, he then observes that

institutionalists observe dramatic effects that do not reflect the mechanics of power and interest. In global society, and also in other organizational arenas, many other phenomena operate—reflecting the dependence of modern expanded actors on institutionalized “scripts” operating in their environments. (Meyer, 2008, p. 799)

There is not the slightest hint that these scripts might themselves be articulations of power relations that are the

Journal of Management Inquiry  
2015, Vol. 24(1) 105–111  
© The Author(s) 2014  
Reprints and permissions:  
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1056492614545306  
jmi.sagepub.com



<sup>1</sup>Cardiff University, UK

### Corresponding Author:

Hugh Willmott, Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University, Cardiff, CF10 3EU, UK.

Email: WillmottH@cardiff.ac.uk

medium and outcome of institutionalized relations of domination and oppression.

In recognition of its partial departure from, and more or less explicit critique of, much mainstream (U.S.) social science, it is possible to raise one, and maybe two, cheers for institutional theory. The cheers are rather muted for several reasons. First, because *all* theories elevate their distinctive claims above, and in opposition to, some alternative theoretical proposition(s), there is nothing particularly distinctive about being critical *in that sense*: positive identity relies on difference and negation. Second, the critique of the mainstream is impeded by the embeddedness of institutional theory in a conservative research tradition where, in Zucker's (1983) words, "alternatives may be literally unthinkable" (cited in Clegg, 2010, p. 5); or, at least, such alternatives are thought about and rendered significant only within the claustrophobic and self-regarding framework of institutional theory. This is exemplified in Meyer (2008) where consideration of anything that remotely resembles what Lukes (1974/2005) terms the second or third dimensions of power is absent (Cooper et al., 2008). In most institutional theory, examination of the relatedness of knowledge and power is deemed to be largely irrelevant; the self-understanding of institutional theory as politically neutral is self-evident; and the silence of institutional theory on contentious issues, such as the institutionalization of domination, oppression, and exploitation in modern work organizations, passes unnoticed. Seemingly, examination of those issues is properly the subject matter of political activists, not scientists. Third, if advocates of institutional theory *are* troubled by the marginalization of power (and, relatedly, of agency) in institutionalist analysis, this is seldom acknowledged, let alone thematized.

The conservative tradition in which institutional theory is mired, if not firmly rooted, is rarely unacknowledged and so remains unexplicated. Instead, it is presumed that the limitations of institutional theory can be remedied through a selective appropriation and incorporation of other traditions, including elements of critical social theory (e.g., Bourdieu, Giddens), as commended by Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, and Suddaby (2008). However, when elements of "European sociology of knowledge and system theories" (Greenwood et al., 2008) are colonized to fill fissures in the "normal science" of institutional theory, the outcomes can be incongruous. Such hybrid fabrications reinforce an impression that, perversely, the tradition of institutional theory does little to encourage reflection on the (institutionalized) limits of its proponents' theorizing (Willmott, 2011). Missing is consideration of how theoretical frameworks, including institutional theory, are forged within specific, if porous, epistemic communities. Relatedly, there is little reflection on the wider historical and cultural contexts that police the boundaries of theory and condition its enactment.

## Limits and "Habitus"<sup>2</sup> of Institutional Theory

The wider contextual formation of theory is exemplified by the emergence of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. It developed, and indeed was provoked, in the context of authoritarian pre-World War Germany of the 1930s where organized capitalism became fused with Nazi totalitarianism.<sup>3</sup> Members of the Frankfurt School were not interested in the phenomenon of authoritarianism simply to demonstrate or refine the analytical potency of Critical Theory. Rather, their intent was to challenge and escape the conservative confines—institutional as well as intellectual—of "traditional theory." "Traditional theory," to quote Horkheimer (1937/1976), the founder of Critical Theory, refers to forms of analysis where "[t]he scholarly specialist 'as' scientist regards social reality and its products as extrinsic to him [*sic*]" (p. 220, emphasis added). In Critical Theory, in contrast, the emphasis is on the continuity between the scholar *qua* scientist and the scholar *qua* citizen:

Critical thinking . . . is motivated today by the effort really to transcend the tension and abolish the opposition between the individual's purposefulness, spontaneity and rationality, and those *work-process relationships* on which society is built. Critical thought has a concept of man [*sic*] as in conflict with himself until this opposition has been removed. (Horkheimer, 1937/1976, p. 220, emphasis added)

Instructively, in this formulation of "critical thinking," Horkheimer (1937/1976) makes direct reference to "work-process relationships"—that is, the very relationships that institutionalist analyses of aspects of business and management, and especially analysis of "institutional work," undertake to address. Since Horkheimer's initial sketching of some key differences between "traditional" and "critical" theory, critical social science has developed in plural directions, many of which would look askance at his (uncritically) gendered and quaintly humanistic formulations. Nonetheless, in many cases, Horkheimer's successors would enthusiastically affirm his positioning of the social scientist as a participant within society (cf. Burawoy, 2005), and would reject any suggestion that the social scientist can, or should, stand as an observer above or outside of it. In turn, this understanding underpins the commitment of critical thinking to a process of emancipatory engagement with, and transformation of, established institutions, with the practical intent of applying its insights to facilitate the full realization of human capabilities—capabilities that are *enacted in and through the* "work-process relationships on which society is built." Whereas the tradition of institutional theory routinely approaches its objects of investigation as external to its analysis, the invitation of critical science is to make central the internal relation of analysis to its objects of investigation. Relatedly, critical social science gives primacy to meaning to power and

politics in the production of society, including the production of knowledge. Much “traditional” social science, including institutional theory, is seen to be captivated by a neo-positivist notion of the impartial, detached, and value-free science. Value-freedom is regarded as a potent myth to which “uncritical” social scientists subscribe, naively or cynically, to gain some measure of legitimacy. The idea, and myth, of freedom is regarded as a major plank of conservative ideology as it inhibits and discredits critical forms of social science that refuse to adhere to it.

For institutional theorists, institutionalization is not primarily an effect of power or a medium of domination. It is a product of power only insofar as it results from coercive isomorphism (e.g., laws and regulations backed up by material and symbolic penalties for their infringement). More generally, institutionalization is understood to be secured primarily through normative and mimetic mechanisms or, more recently, through the operation of (multiple) logics. Proponents of institutional theory then encounter a problem when it comes to explaining change. When grappling with this problem, some institutionalists have sought to move beyond the study of coercive isomorphism by examining the role of power or powerful actors (e.g., “institutional entrepreneurs”) in initiating change (e.g., Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; see Willmott, 2013a). When seeking to explain the role of professional associations with regard to the jurisdiction of accounting firms, for example, Greenwood, Suddaby, and Hinings (2002) focus on actors’ engagement in processes of “theorization.” But they do so in a way that abstracts activity from the relations of power that nurture such “theorization” processes, and they make no reference to the normalization of domination with regard to the kinds of practices and changes that were deemed legitimate. In institutional theory, the analytical priorities are pre-determined. The cart of meaning is already placed before the power of the horse. The arrangement is natural and unproblematic when there is no interest in change or movement. However, it has limitations when seeking to make sense of (the direction and boundaries of) innovation and change. Here, Clegg’s (2010) observation that “Foucault has been *strangely neglected* by institutional theory” (pp. 8-9, emphasis added) is instructive. It is enlightening not only with regard to Foucault’s extensive and sophisticated reflections on power, and especially governmentality, but also with regard to institutionalists’ superficial acquaintance with diverse variants of critical social science—from Habermas to Laclau and Mouffe. Clegg’s remark about the “strange” neglect of Foucault is, I presume, ironic because, to my mind, it would be much stranger if anything recognizable as Foucault, and especially his complex, evolving, and provocative reflections on power, had been embraced by proponents of institutional theory. A careful reading of Foucault would, I believe, upend almost every assumption and truism of institutional theory (Cooper et al., 2008). However, because Foucault’s thinking is rendered close to unintelligible when

placed and read within the frame of institutional theory, the risk of such a misadventure is, as Clegg notes, minimal.

It is a different story when it comes to the compatibility of institutionalism and business schools. In contrast to the relationship with Foucauldian studies, which has been one of mutual disinterest and minimal engagement, the connection between institutional theory and business schools has flourished, especially in North America, and is now threatening to be exported globally. With the emulation of the ethos of U.S. schools in Europe and elsewhere, institutional theory has spread well beyond North America, and is now being exported globally. In the “habitus” of the business school, institutional theory may pass as being a little “intellectual” and even “edgy,” at least in comparison with ultra-conservative and reactionary forms of analysis that exert a hegemonic grip on the more institutionally dominant “disciplines” of finance, marketing, and strategy. For proponents of institutional theory, as well as for business school deans, institutionalism offers a less troublesome substitute for more critical forms of analysis that may ruffle the feathers of existing and potential patrons. Institutional theory is *sympathique* as it “paints a rather sanitary view of the world” (Munir, 2014, p. 91)—in which considerations of inequality, for example, are conveniently air-brushed out, and it poses no forceful challenge to the dominance of neo-positivism in business schools since, as noted above, institutionalists are inclined to endorse the myth of value-free social science. Institutional theory may lack any obvious relevance to the managerial cadre, but it is unthreatening and so readily incorporated. For their part, exponents of institutional theory are seemingly content to occupy research silos where the highest aspiration is to accumulate “hits” in target journals. Any politico-ethical impulse to participate in movements committed to projects of emancipatory transformation is feint or snuffed out by adherence to the professional ideology of value-free social science (see, for example, Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2008). Indeed, there seems to be little appetite among institutionalists even to challenge established, mainstream educational curricula (e.g., in areas of finance, marketing, accounting, operational research) where basic insights of institutionalism could be mobilized to challenge the mania for scientism in the form of mathematical modeling (see Lawson, 2013). As a consequence, and comically, institutional theory exemplifies its own (institutionalist) insights that “theories are concocted [or at least nurtured] to legitimate existing social institutions” (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 145).

Admittedly, the above observations offer something of a polemical caricature of institutional theory, and so it is relevant to acknowledge the existence of a few calls and attempts to propel it in a more “critical” direction (e.g., Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Seo & Creed, 2002). There have, however, been few positive responses to those invitations, perhaps because, as suggested above, proponents of institutional theory are entrenched in a conservative tradition

of social science. The preferred direction of development has, instead, involved variations on, and elaborations of, a mantra that in its most recent incantation takes the form of the Institutional Logics Approach (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). When endeavouring to remedy deficiencies with regard to theorizing change and/or agency but also power, such reinventions of institutional theory may strive to apply and incorporate insights from critical thinkers (e.g., Bourdieu and Giddens). An effect of such endeavours has been to betray institutional theory's (uncritical) pedigree. Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) interpret the incongruity of such efforts instructively, but also improbably, as symptomatic of a tendency of institutional studies to "remain apolitical" (p. 247). "Apolitical?!" From the perspective of critical social science, this assessment is no less damning than it is implausible. For whatever is presented as "apolitical" is immediately suspected of making a particularly well camouflaged, and so insidious, political, value-laden intervention.

### **Beyond the "Power Problem": Domination, Oppression, and Resistance**

The institutional theory juggernaut rolls on, fueled by the unshakable conviction that its basic (conservative, neo-positivistic) framework must be retained while anticipating a possibly endless journey whose continuation is recognized to require some elaborations and renovations—for example, some consideration of "habits of power" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 247). When power is diagnosed as an oversight, rather than as a symptom of conservatism, there is the presumption that the basic framework of institutional theory can, and should, be pre-served while being "open" to the incorporation of enhancements capable of extending its life. From within the neo-positivist formulation of institutional theory, it is self evident that other approaches, including those that place the relation of power to knowledge at their centre, are scientifically challenged and/or unacceptably "political." Those deficiencies of critical analysis are seen to account for its lack of legitimacy as a consequence of being regarded as "political", in contrast to the ostensibly "apolitical" ethos of institutional theory. This self-understanding may also offer some explanation of the remarkable reluctance amongst proponents of institutional theory to engage with their critics. Interest in other approaches is, it seems, confined to the selective appropriation of their contents for purposes of further tightening the domesticating grip of institutional theory on social and organizational analysis.

Again, it is necessary to moderate this tirade by acknowledging that some advocates of institutional theory are doubtless genuine in their desire to study "the capacity to rely upon force or domination to effect institutional ends" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 247; see also Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011). Yet, it is also relevant to note how this interest

has, to date, been largely rhetorical and prescriptive rather than empirical and analytical. Calls to consider the "fundamental role of power" (Lawrence, 2008, p. 171) in the analysis of institutions and institutional work have, so far, met with a vanishingly slight response. The silence is tacitly acknowledged in a recent review of the institutional work literature (Lawrence, Leca, & Zilber, 2013) that, inadvertently, shows just how little it has to say about the "fundamental role of power," let alone about domination or oppression. The review is also unintentionally revealing as it includes no hint of how studies of institutional work might be undertaken to examine, for example, how relations of domination and oppression become institutionalized, or how mundane forms of institutionalization harbor forms of domination and oppression. It is only when Lawrence et al. (2013) turn to consider one of the articles included in the Special Issue on institutional work published in *Organization Studies*, to which their article provides an Introduction, that any reference is made to a study that connects institutional work and power, "especially oppression and resistance" (Lawrence et al., 2013, p. 1027). That study is Marti and Fernández's (2013) "The Institutional Work of Oppression and Resistance: Learning From the Holocaust." Examining this article in some detail serves to illustrate a number of points and arguments presented so far.

### **Learning From the Holocaust**

The inclusion of Marti and Fernández's article in the Special Issue is to be applauded, but it is also surprising as it makes almost no reference to the literature on "institutional work." It is welcome and revealing because it does connect "institutional work"—*although it is not institutional theory's conception of institutional work*—to oppression and resistance. Specifically, it considers the practices—"ranging from the physical and verbal assaults through the massive killing through debilitation and starvation, mass shootings, death marches and gassing" (Marti & Fernández, 2013, p. 1199)—that were integral to the production of the Holocaust (see also Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006, Chapter 6). To repeat, the intellectual debt of Marti and Fernández's analysis is not to institutional theory, however. Instead, it is to more critical traditions of social science (e.g., Bauman, 1989; Clegg, Pina e Cunha, & Rego, 2013; Pina e Cunha, Rego, & Clegg, 2010). It is this engagement that enables Marti and Fernández' to make of morality is *awkward and ambiguous* if it appears at all" in institutional theory (Marti and Fernández, 2013, p. 1216, emphasis added in institutional theory). It is an awkwardness and ambiguity that, I suggest, is traceable to the affinity of institutionalism with "traditional theory" (Horkheimer, 1937/1976). In institutional theory, recognition, let alone consideration, of its inescapably moral conditions and implications is perturbing—a perturbation that betrays its self-understanding as politically neutral and its implicit commitment to "science as usual" (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 167, cited

by Marti & Fernández, 2013, p. 1216). With these observations in mind, I struggle to read Marti and Fernández's analysis primarily as an exemplar of institutional theory and/or as a contribution to the institutionalist analysis of "institutional work." Rather, it offers a demonstration of the analysis of "institutional work" that can be accomplished when its study is released from the conservative grip of institutional theory. Its express purpose is to show how "actors first maintain domination and grant acquiescence to oppression and, second, target oppressive systems through acts of resistance" (Marti & Fernández, 2013, p. 1195). The theme of "institutional work" provides Marti and Fernández with a convenient Trojan horse (immobilized in institutional theory by its perverse relationship to the cart of meaning, see *supra*) for this critical purpose.

## Conclusion

Institutional theory inhabits a conservative tradition where, despite conceiving of the social world as a product of meaningful externalization, institutions and institutionalization are analyzed as if they were a *given* object of scientific investigation, rather than an object embedded in, and reproductive of, relations of domination and oppression. This positioning makes it possible for institutional theory to be critical of approaches, including variants of rationalist analysis, that do not share its (constructionist) social ontology, while itself deferring to an (neo-positivist) epistemology. In addition to its uncritical stance toward neo-positivism, institutional theory is differentiated from critical theory by a disinclination to appreciate "the fundamental role of power" (Lawrence, 2008, p. 171) in processes of institutionalization, including the institutionalization of knowledge. Unlike varieties of critical analysis, institutional theory is not animated by the intent to disclose forms of domination, oppression, and exploitation; it does not study the *political* production of taken-for-grantedness; and it makes little contribution to fostering forms of resistance capable of removing blatant as well as veiled and normalized forms of tyranny.

As Marti and Fernández (2013) show, institutional work produces death camps, other total institutions, and, more banally, the oppressive features of everyday work organizations parodied as the *Ministry of Truth* by Orwell in 1984 (Willmott, 2013c). Marti and Fernández's disturbing analysis of mundane, "de-humanizing" practices of domination, oppression, and resistance concludes with the observation that "We are living in troubling times and must therefore address troubling issues" (see also Willmott, 2013c, p. 1218). All times doubtless have their troubles. The period of the Cuban Missile Crisis, when the world was brought to the brink of nuclear annihilation, was perhaps more immediately troubling than the multiple crises and specters haunting us today (see Gamble, 2009, et seq.). Unanimity on what are the most troubling issues is unlikely since such "facts" are not produced by, and do not speak for, themselves. Everything—even the most seemingly benign values and practices, such as

institutionalism—can be dangerous, as Foucault reminds us.<sup>4</sup> Unanimity is appealing but consensus may also indicate a loss of critical will when it breeds complacency and/or inhibits dissent. What can be said with greater confidence is that studies of troubling issues, including the organization of genocide or the widespread use of slavery and sweatshop labor in, and by, corporations (Bales, 2004; Crane, 2013), seldom appear in leading business, management, and organization journals. Indeed, even mundane forms of oppression and resistance that become institutionalized in ordinary work organizations (Willmott, 2013a, 2013c) largely escape the attentions of most students of management and business (see also Clegg et al., 2006).

Exponents of institutional theory and students of institutional work could, in principle, shift their frame of reference to pursue analysis that prioritizes the study of domination, oppression, and resistance. However, so long as they work within a conservative tradition, their priorities lie, and are institutionalized, elsewhere. Their focus is on processes of institutionalization per se, and not on these processes as a medium and outcome of historically specific forms of domination, oppression, and resistance. This "uncritical" focus is uninformed by an anticipation of the development of institutions as dedicated to the removal of "class work" (Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013) and related forms of subjugation (e.g., racism, sexism, etc.).

The changes anticipated and fostered by variants of critical social science are not utopian. During the past two centuries, remarkable progress has been made with regard, for example, to challenging and overcoming the taken-for-grantedness of slavery and racial and sexual discrimination. Today, however, there are signs of reversal. In workplaces, there are erosions of employee rights, terms and conditions, as evident in the proliferation of "zero-hours" contracts. Deeply ingrained forms of tyranny routinely veiled from public knowledge and accountability—such as those disclosed by National Security Agency (NSA) whistleblower Edward Snowden—can be related to a post-1970s backlash against progressive movements (with regard to ecology as well as civil rights and feminism) to which the conservatism of institutional theory contributes. By offering an anodyne alternative to critical thinking, proponents of institutional theory have unintentionally done more to dampen and impede the development and dissemination of critical forms of analysis (e.g., in business schools) than they have done to discredit and counter neo-liberal economic rationalism.

Given the multiple crises—climate change and ecological degradation, the threat of nuclear proliferation, and global financial instability—there is little room for political complacency or its intellectual equivalent, scholasticism. Much remains to be done in relation to what Munir (2014) terms "problematic uses of power" (p. 91) and, in particular, the role of corporations, including financial institutions, which "have not only come to dominate economies, but are shaping entire societies" (p. 91), and which contribute directly to needless

inequality and oppression, and the avoidable escalation of ecological and financial crises (Corporate Reform Collective, 2014). A question for subscribers to institutional analysis is this: If you are actually concerned about domination, oppression, and resistance, including its (re)production through “institutional work,” why begin with, or stick with, a theory in which power lacks a “fundamental role?” (Lawrence, 2008, p. 171). Would it not be more coherent to begin with a critical form of analysis—post-feminist, post-structural, post-colonial, and so on—and then perhaps consider how elements of institutional theory might be adapted and reworked to enrich that analysis in ways that can expand human capacities to exercise freedom by questioning, resisting, and sometimes supporting the multidimensional operation of power?

### Acknowledgment

A big “thank you” to Stewart Clegg, Tim Edwards, and Mahmoud Ezzamel for their incisive and constructive comments on an earlier draft of this article.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Notes

1. *Verstehen* signals the ontological difference between natural and social objects of inquiry. In contrast to the phenomena of interest to the natural scientist, the assumption of *verstehen* is that phenomena studied by the social scientist are constituted within frames of meaning. The position is complicated as the natural sciences are themselves pursued within such frames of meaning provided by the disciplines of physics, chemistry, and so on. In this respect, knowledge of the natural world also exemplifies *verstehen* but in the form of what Giddens (1977) would term a “single hermeneutic.” There are, however, at least two key differences between natural and social sciences. First, the subject matter of natural science, as contrasted with how this subject matter is represented, does not comprise frames of meaning. That is why it is unrewarding to inquire into the culture of an atom, for example, to appreciate the meanings that guided its movements. The second, more critical, difference between natural and social scientific inquiries arises from the latter’s commonality with, as well as divergence from, the researcher’s frame of meaning. These worlds differ, but the social world of the social scientist has emerged from that of non-social scientists, and they intersect and are interdependent. Social scientific researchers are invariably dependent, symbolically and/or materially, on their research subjects. Moreover, research subjects may well selectively interpret, adopt, and be influenced by research findings, and, as a consequence, they may change the phenomena being studied. Giddens (1977) calls

this the “double hermeneutic” (p. 83) of social science: “The social sciences are concerned with a pre-interpreted world, in which meaning-frames are integral to their ‘subject matter,’ i.e. the intersubjectivity of practical social life. Social science thus involves a ‘double hermeneutic,’ linking its theories, as frames of meaning, with those which are already a constituent part of social life” (see also Giddens, 1976, p. 148, et seq.).

2. Bourdieu (1992) refers to the *habitus* as a “system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes *without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them*. Objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated *without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor*” (p. 53, emphases added).  
I understand the term *habitus* to point to how actors inhabit institutions, such as business schools. The *habitus* comprises embodied background understandings that are a condition of possibility of the reproduction and transformation—“structuring structures”—of institutions.
3. When members of the Frankfurt School became exiled to the United States, the focus of their work shifted from the tyranny and authoritarianism of the state to the tyranny and authoritarianism of the market.
4. As Foucault (1997) writes, “My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism” (p. 256).

### References

- Bales, K. (2004). *Disposable people: New slavery in the global economy* (Rev. ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bauman, Z. (1989). *Modernity and the holocaust*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. London, England: Penguin.
- Bourdieu, P. (1992). *The logic of practice* (New ed.). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Burawoy, M. (2005). For public sociology. *American Sociological Review*, 70, 4-28.
- Clegg, S. (2010). The state, power, and agency: Missing in action in institutional theory? *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 19, 4-13.
- Clegg, S., Courpasson, D., & Phillips, N. (2006). *Power and organizations*. London, England: Sage.
- Clegg, S., Pina e Cunha, M., & Rego, A. (2013). To the victors go the spoils! Distributed agencies, inhumanities, and the case of Comrade Duch of the Khmer Rouge. In F-X. de Vaujany & N. Mitev (Eds.), *Materiality and space: Organizations, artefacts and practices* (pp. 216-239). London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cooper, D., Ezzamel, M., & Willmott, H. C. (2008). Examining “institutionalization”: A critical theoretic perspective. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, K. Sahlin, & R. Suddaby (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organizational institutionalism* (pp. 673-701). London, England: Sage.

- Corporate Reform Collective (2014). *Fighting Corporate Abuse*. London: Pluto.
- Crane, A. (2013). Modern slavery as a management practice: Exploring the conditions and capabilities for human exploitation. *Academy of Management Review*, 38, 49-69.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2001). *Making social science matter*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1997). *Michel Foucault: Ethics, subjectivity, and truth* (P. Rabinow, Ed.). New York, NY: The New Press.
- Gamble, A. (2009). *The spectre at the feast: Capitalism, crisis and the politics of recession*. London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Giddens, A. (1976). *New rules of sociological method*. London, England: Heinemann.
- Giddens, A. (1977). *Studies in social and political theory*. London, England: Hutchinson.
- Gray, B., & Kish-Gephart, J. J. (2013). Encountering social class differences at work: How "Class Work" perpetuates inequality. *Academy of Management Review*, 38(4), 67-699.
- Greenwood, R., & Hinings, C. R. (1996). Understanding radical organizational change: Bringing together the old and the new institutionalism. *Academy of Management Review*, 21, 1022-1054.
- Greenwood, R., Oliver, C., Sahlin, K., & Suddaby, R. (2008). Introduction. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, K. Sahlin, & R. Suddaby (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organizational institutionalism* (pp. 1-46). London, England: Sage.
- Greenwood, R., Suddaby, R., & Hinings, C. R. (2002). Theorising change: The role of professional associations in the transformation of institutionalized fields. *Academy of Management Journal*, 45, 58-80.
- Horkheimer, M. (1976). Traditional and critical theory. In P. Connerton (Ed.), *Critical sociology* (pp. 206-224). Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin. (Original work published 1937)
- Lawrence, T. B. (2008). Power, institutions and organizations. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, K. Sahlin, & R. Suddaby (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organizational institutionalism* (pp. 170-197). London, England: Sage.
- Lawrence, T. B., Leca, B., & Zilber, T. B. (2013). Institutional work: Current research, new directions, and overlooked issues. *Organization Studies*, 34, 1023-1033.
- Lawrence, T. B., & Suddaby, R. (2006). Institutions and institutional work. In S. R. Clegg, C. Hardy, T. B. Lawrence, & W. R. Nord (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organization studies* (2nd ed., pp. 215-254). London, England: Sage.
- Lawrence, T. B., Suddaby, R., & Leca, B. (Eds.). (2011). *Institutional work: Actors and agency in institutional studies of organizations*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Lawson, T. (2013). What is this "school" called neo-classical economics. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 37(5), 947-983.
- Lukes, S. (2005). *Power: A radical view* (2nd ed.). London, England: Palgrave Macmillan. (Original work published 1974)
- Marti, I., & Fernández, P. (2013). The institutional work of oppression and resistance: Learning from the holocaust. *Organization Studies*, 34, 1195-1223.
- Meyer, J. (2008). Reflections on institutional theories of organizations. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, K. Sahlin, & R. Suddaby (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organizational institutionalism* (pp. 790-812). London, England: Sage.
- Munir, K. A. (2015). A loss of power in institutional theory? *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 24(1), 90-92.
- Pina e Cunha, M., Rego, A., & Clegg, S. (2010). Obedience and evil: From Milgram and Kampuchea to normal organizations. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 97, 291-309.
- Rorty, R. (1981). *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Schneiberg, M., & Lounsbury, M. (2008). Social movements and institutional analysis. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, K. Sahlin, & R. Suddaby (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organizational institutionalism* (pp. 651-672). London, England: Sage.
- Seo, M. G., & Creed, D. (2002). Institutional contradictions, praxis, and institutional change: A dialectical perspective. *Academy of Management Review*, 27, 222-247.
- Thornton, P. H., Ocasio, W., & Lounsbury, M. (2012). *The institutional logics perspective: A new approach to culture, structure and process*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Willmott, H. C. (2011). "Institutional work" for what? Problems and prospects of institutional theory. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 20, 67-72.
- Willmott, H. C. (2013a). Changing institutions: Critical management studies as a social movement. In V. Malin, J. Murphy, & M. Siltaoja (Eds.), *Getting things done: Practice in critical management studies* (pp. 123-164). Bingley, UK: Emerald Press.
- Willmott, H. C. (2013b). OT and power: The significance of value-orientations and a plea for pluralism. *Tamara Journal for Critical Organizational Inquiry*, 11(2), 53-66.
- Willmott, H. C. (2013c). "The substitution of one piece of nonsense for another": Reflections on resistance, gaming, and subjugation. *Journal of Management Studies*, 50, 443-473.
- Zald, M., & Lounsbury, M. (2010). The wizards of Oz: Towards an institutional approach to elites, expertise, and command posts. *Organization Studies*, 31, 963-996.
- Zucker, L. (1983). Organizations as institutions. In S. B. Bacharach (Ed.), *Advances in organizational theory and research* (Vol. 2, pp. 1-43). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

## Author Biography

**Hugh Willmott** is a research professor in organization studies, Cardiff Business School, and has held visiting professors at Copenhagen Business School and the Universities of Uppsala, Lund, Innsbruck, and Sydney, and the University of Technology, Sydney. He previously held professorial appointments at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST) (now Manchester Business School) and Cambridge. He co-founded the International Labor Process Conference and the International Critical Management Studies Conference. He currently serves on the board of *Organization Studies* and *Journal of Management Studies*, and is an associate editor of *Academy of Management Review*. He has previously served on the board of *Administrative Science Quarterly* and *Accounting, Organizations, and Society*. He has contributed to a wide range of management and social science journals and has published more than 20 books. Full details can be found on his homepage: <https://sites.google.com/site/hughwillmottshomepage>