

Introduction

In the second preface to *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Émile Durkheim (1895 [1982]: 54ff.) posited that a science of society was necessarily a science of institutions—their emergence, evolution, and, perhaps, decay and death. Little did Durkheim realize that one of the central concepts of his own sociology—things he defined as *collective ways of acting and thinking*—would be, like many other cherished concepts, defined in so many different ways as to mean everything and nothing. This book is about institutions. Reasonably, one might ask why now? Why another book on institutions? In part, sociology, we believe, is at a critical juncture. Like so many of the major pendulum swings designed to rectify serious omissions in mid-century functionalism (e.g., the rise of conflict theory, constructivism, inequality studies), the “cultural turn” (Patterson 2014) has largely pushed structural accounts into the background. Likewise, the cultural turn has dominated the last several decades of institutional analysis (Friedland and Alford 1991; Jepperson and Meyer 2021), reducing the substance that consumed so many classical works, ranging from Spencer’s *Principles of Sociology* to Weber’s oeuvre on “social orders” to the margins of a theory of institutions. Institutions, however are more than cultural beliefs and practices patterned and enduring; they are real structural *and* cultural adaptations that demarcate physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space.

Hence, our conceptualization of institutions is not completely new, but it is synthetic and generative. It is a book that merges its authors’ already shared notion of institutions, both of whom draw in different ways from very distinctive sources. The term institution is indebted to Herbert Spencer’s usage in the *Principles of Sociology*, which organized a massive body of data around the ubiquitous structural units of organization that appear to be building blocks of every society—e.g., kinship, polity, and so forth. The realism staked throughout, that institutions are produced and reproduced by special collectives that work, consciously, to deal with individual and collective problems and to guard this authority stems from the “old” institutionalism of Stinchcombe (1997) and Selznick (1996), as well as Eisenstadt (1965). And, the phenomenological and social psychological

consequences of institutions emerges from Weber's (1978) *spheres* of social action and a loose but muscular interpretation of Durkheim refracted through Shils (1975). Our view of institutions shares some, but not much with the myriad, loosely overlapping visions of institutions most prominently promoted by *new institutionalists*. Indeed, they are environments in which fields, sectors, niches, and their constituent actors—organizations and groups—operate. But, they are *real, emergent levels of social reality*; they occupy space, and can be touched to some degree. They are not purely reducible to the organizations and roles that inhabit these spaces. They are less the specific content or manifestation (e.g., capitalism or democracy) and, instead, the general form (e.g., economy or polity).

The remainder of this introduction is organized around five myths about institutions that are perpetuated in sociology today: (1) institutions are reifications; (2) institutions are practices and/or beliefs; (3) institutions are manifest in social phenomena that inhabit their space, like organizations, or roles; (4) premodern institutions, at least those prior to capitalism or nation-states, are radically different and thereby less interesting; and, finally, (5) little can be gleaned from the analysis of the evolution of humans, human society, or our brains and bodies. In shattering these myths, we are able to not only situate our analysis and anticipate what the reader will encounter throughout, but we are hopefully able to also reclaim the terminology surrounding institutions.

Myth 1: Institutions are Reifications

One of the worst things to happen to sociology in the last half century was the movement towards methodological individualism (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010). In the search for mechanisms, out of fear that abstract social forces were impossible to measure, and in the goal of raising emic over etic knowledge, lived experience over generalizability, many sociologists have abandoned the vision of a social world with emergent levels of social reality. It is true that sociology failed to satisfyingly link the macro-micro levels of social reality, but it is no less true that linking these two levels does not a science make. It is also true that every human society that we know of has had some semblance of kinship, polity, religion, economy, and law. By that, we mean to say that we may look at the individual roles people play, like “mother”, or we may look at the similarities and variation in the groups (families) that these roles are enacted daily, or we may look at the enduring structural and cultural elements that tie present families together, as well as link them to the past and an anticipated future. To be sure, the further back in human history we go, the blurrier the lines between, say, polity

and kinship become in both theory and practice. And, yet, a contemporary human would find certain actions reflective of economic-like behavior vis-à-vis religious behavior.

But, aren't institutions simply reifications, as Lukacs proposed (Parkinson 1970)? Most everything in science is a reification. We cannot see germs without special instruments, and yet we take for granted the fact that they cause illness and by targeting them we can prevent or alleviate their effects. Likewise, sociologists cannot "see" most of the things we study. The self, so personal and so tangible, is *constructed* through the acquisition of language and the neurobiological capacity to identify objects that endure in memory, affect, and cognition. But, the self is not a physical fact like gravity, nor is it visible without special instruments designed to measure and observe it. Institutions are unnatural like the self; products of human construction. But, like the self, they are tangible things, identifiable both to the naked eye (in some ways, more accurately than the self) and to instruments designed to measure them. They are enduring, more so than the individuals who populate them. And, they possess distinctive dynamics irreducible to individuals, though as we shall see in early chapters and throughout, like the self, they depend on our evolved brains and bodies. To anticipate the more abstract discussions in Chapters 3–4 and the substantive, historically rich chapters on specific institutions (e.g., Chapter 8 on polity or 10 on religion), we offer some rather broad and parsimonious thoughts on the tangibility of institutions, which, subsequently, forms the basis of our critique of the remaining four myths.

First, institutions, or what we will usually refer to as *institutional spheres*, are manifest in four dimensions of social reality: physical, temporal, social, and symbolic. The physical provides the greatest evidence of their footprint. Humans have always built houses, and houses have always been the principal center of kinship activity. A naïve observer, from contemporary China, Chile, or Canada, would easily identify a house in a foraging society's landscape regardless of the architecture or the adornment. Arguably, a native to a foraging society, given enough time to get over the shock of the scale and size of modern communities, would easily identify houses and their function in those very same countries. Even more salient are the differences between kinship space and political space. Again, this is a relative pronouncement that depends on twin processes we will describe in later chapters, differentiation and autonomy. In a chiefdom, for instance, polity is discernible to a trained eye, as the chief's hut looks very much like every other hut but is usually positioned in space differently. Over time, chiefdoms develop ways of further distinguishing politics and

political action from kinship and kinship behavior. However, the untrained eye would easily recognize a palace just as a denizen of a city-state from Mesopotamia would deduce that the White House or Buckingham Palace were sites of very different events and decisions than a neighborhood with non-descript row houses.

These tangible distinctions are buttressed by the temporal and social dimensions of institutional spheres. Time feels more natural than any other dimension, and thus its manipulation and routinization allow analysis and people alike to take for granted the powerful forces regulating the daily lives of individuals. What is real is often taken for unreal, thus forever distorting the capacity to understand the social universe. The earliest strains towards a religious sphere emerge in calendrical rituals designed to differentiate sacred emotions, attitudes, and actions from their profane counterparts (Wallace 1966). The economy has always impinged on kinship life, as seasonal migration was at the heart of foraging societies in ways echoed by the daily and seasonal rounds of agrarian life or the highly regularized, formalized pattern of industrial factory life. Ceremonial rituals great and small become deeply embedded in the fabric of social life, such as the first Tuesday of every November being Election Day in the U.S. Every four years, the U.S. builds to a fervor as campaigns and debates generate the same sort of effervescence Durkheim spoke of until the collective ritual of watching the results pour in and a winner be declared. It was, perhaps, the artificial extension of the 2020 election's resolution that made it feel so unsatisfying and helped foment the grievances that led to the eventual insurrection on January 6th of the following year. In those rituals, both big (Election Day) and small (watching the debates), our political identities are made salient and we are primed to evaluate political thoughts and behaviors by politically-based criteria. This ephemeral role-taking is many people's only tangible cognitive and affectual connection to the political sphere, but, as with any institution, there are myriad people devoted to the institutional sphere's production, reproduction, and expansion. We can see them, hear them, talk to them. They are real. And, like a professor devoted to her discipline or a hedge fund manager a slave to his clients, they tend to struggle with role compartmentalization and bleed politics, science, or economics into other encounters and interactions shaped by other institutional spheres. As long as sociologists look at outcomes of institutional activities in specific behaviors rather than examining the underlying dynamics of institutions and their relations with each other, understanding of human societies will be very limited.

Finally, it is the symbolic dimension that breaths life, or more accurately, meaning, into the physical, temporal, and social dimensions of institutional

life. Who are doctors? They are the people wearing white lab coats. Who are judges? Black robes. Institutional spheres designate or signify the objects that belong and that are foreign. That means they classify with words, in themes of discourse that become narratives about institutional activities, in texts, and in performance the people, places, and things that are political or economic. Where the lines between an object's political or economic attachment is in doubt, we find sources of tension and contestation; often the core of cautionary tales, fables, and aphorisms. Nonetheless, the carving out of physical space is also a symbolic act: buildings develop architectural styles and adopt emblems and signage that transcend functionality and double as representations. Costumes and uniforms, symbols of status achieved or ascribed, and everyday tools all become elements of meaning that uphold the expressive or interaction order. And while an object or set of interrelated objects, a space or temporal distinction, or a role may not have a firmly delineated connection to an institutional sphere, the conflict itself underscores the belief and reality that different institutional spheres exist and organize the self, encounters and interaction, informal and formal groups, and, ultimately, even communities themselves. As such, we can expect institutional spheres to have emergent properties worthy of study in their own right. What exactly those properties are, however, constitute our next two myths.

Myth 2: Institutions Are Practices and/or Beliefs

As the idea that institutions were reifications took hold, a reclamation project began across a number of disciplines, most notably sociology and economics. The goal was how to keep the popular concept *institution* and its supposed verb/process *institutionalization*, without committing the sin of treating it as a real thing. Out of this intellectual project came a loosely connected body of scholarship otherwise known as the *New Institutionalism* (Nee 2005; Powell and DiMaggio 1991). Substituting *cultural* models of institutions for structural ones, institutions remained environments in which organizations operated, but without structure *and* with the practical nature of professions (Stinchcombe 1997) abstracted away into the background. In its place, grew rationalized forms, practices, and beliefs (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Thornton et al. 2012), and, at times, rules and resources (Giddens 1984; North 1990). That is, the focus shifted from institutions as things to their consequences in bringing about convergence or equivalence across the units of analysis that had become far more interesting to organizational scholars: fields (Martin 2003), niches (Hannan and Freeman 1977), sectors (Scott and Meyer 1983),

and markets (Fligstein 1996; Ouchi 1980). Important and interesting, new institutionalism—which has long overemphasized the economic organization over other types of corporate units—has primarily conceptualized institutions as isomorphic forces of legal regulation (Dobbin and Sutton 1998; Edelman and Suchman 1997), normative pressures from professions (DiMaggio 1991), or Weberian-esque myths constraining organizational construction (Boli, Ramirez, and Meyer 1985; Thomas et al. 1987). The hardness or tangibility of institutions has given way to vague, but highly flexible concepts like “logics,” whose primary consequence, phenomenologically, are patterning beliefs and practices. Our view is that institutions *are real things*, revealing a real character in their structure and symbol systems that needs to be treated as a powerful force in human social organization. It is not a loose name for more fundamental processes; rather, it is generative of these process and, hence, must be understood as whole.

There is some merit in the advances made by new institutionalism, specifically in the effects the economic sphere has on formal organizations. However, the institutional sphere is lost amidst these analyses, relegated to a small subset of fields or sectors, organizations, or beliefs and practices. In *The Elementary Forms*, Durkheim did not define religion by its beliefs and practices; *cults* were defined by these constituent elements. Religion was (a) the moral community who (b) shared a set of interlocking “cults” that came to (c) comprise the general way of thinking and acting in relationship to the sacred or supranatural. It is the entire system or sphere of social organization that constitutes religion. The new institutionalists have lost sight of the way systems pattern discrete types of organization and communication (Luhmann 1982, 1995), exchange (Parsons 1990), or interaction (Turner 2003). The actual arrangement of people committed to maintaining the institutional sphere’s practical and theoretic reality are peripheral or relegated to economic entrepreneurs (DiMaggio 1988; Levy and Scully 2007). And the big *raison d’être* of social organization—that is, to resolve exigencies for the sake of individual and collective survival—is replaced by the twin motivations of wealth accumulation and legitimation.

Myth 3: Institutions Can Be Organizations or Actors

As institutions disappear from plain view, they are rapidly replaced by colloquialism that makes just about any social phenomenon that endures for a period of time an institution. Social scientific concepts, of course, like “the words of everyday language, like the concepts they express, are always susceptible of more than one meaning, and the scholar employing them in their accepted use without further definition would risk serious

misunderstanding” (Durkheim 1897 [1951]: 1). To be sure, it is conventional to call a person, say Ted Kennedy, who has been around an organization for a long time an institution; to refer to a prestigious, long-standing organization, like Harvard, an institution. The latter, especially, harkens back to mid-century sociology that spent inordinate amounts of time in mental hospitals, or what were generally termed institutions, and the process by which a patient was admitted and socialized, institutionalization (Goffman 1961; Scheff 1966). But, was Goffman really interested in total institutions or the unique structural and cultural qualities of some *organizations* and their pursuit of total *commitment* (Kanter 1968)? The pervasive and lackadaisical use of institution, when Goffman likely meant the verb form *institutionalization*, led to Coser’s (1974) co-optation of the term to refer to just about any type of non-formal social organization that thrust total commitment onto the individual. And, eventually, to the terms used to refer to beliefs (or myths) and practices. Once it was free of any clear system of classification, it became possible to label anything, from voting to the handshake, to a person or an organization, as an institution (Jepperson 1991). So, what is an institution? Is it a bureaucratic entity capable of processing large batches of similar others, as Goffman intends? Is it patterned relationships that demand and command undivided attention and resource mobilization as Coser intends? Are they myths, beliefs, practices, logics, or simply the taken-for-granted environment or container in which the real action, organizational dynamics, occurs? Or is it any social phenomenon capable of patterning the structure, and therefore thoughts and actions, of individual or collective actors?

In some ways, it might be better to answer these questions by refashioning a new conceptual tool and letting new institutionalism keep the term institution. After all, a social scientific consensus over the term has never existed—e.g., in anthropological literature, for instance, institutions have often been seen as synonymous with structural features of a society, like “property” or “marriage” (Evans-Pritchard et al. 1956; Hobhouse et al. 1930; Maine 1888), instead of the systems that they are usually embedded. But, we also believe sociologists should care about how we classify phenomenon, and should also care about distinguishing elements of a thing from the thing itself. People or organizations are actors whose realities are institutionalized, or patterned by the structure and culture of an institutional sphere. Some individuals (whether the person or the role) and organizations can become representational. In Durkheimian terms, we mean to say that Harvard can come to embody many cherished values of the educational sphere, but that does not make it an institution; it makes it an influential node in a network of other organizations and individuals who

are embedded in the educational sphere. Institutional spheres institute certain ritualized action events, like voting or admission rituals, as well as constitutive rules (D'Andrade 1984; Swanson 1971) that delineate what “marriage” or “property” is and is not, but to focus only on these, or call these institutions, is to ignore the actors embedded in these cognitive and structural systems—both subject to their force and purposefully engaged in maintaining, expanding, or changing the events, their meaning, and the rules (Stinchcombe 1997).

Popular, then, or not, we maintain the position that institutions, or perhaps more accurately, institutional spheres are *macro structural and cultural spaces that organize virtually all human activities that are central human concerns and a significant portion of the population*. Institutions are also *the result and fountain-head of human agency and, hence, are changed and rebuilt by acts of individual and collective agency*. This definition delimits the range of things we can legitimately call an element of an institutional sphere, but delimited to particular forms of structure and culture, as we will emphasize in the next three introductory chapters. Institutions align nicely with many subfields in sociology that focus on a specific set of related actors, resources, and rules: family (or what we would call kinship), polity, religion, economy, law, as well as medicine, science, and media/entertainment; and this fact makes even more surprising the view that they are “not real.” Empirically, this definition returns us to one virtue of now-rejected functionalism, whatever its other many faults. The evolution of societies was seen as the evolution of institutions and the corporate units and their cultures from which institutions are constructed. Indeed, when refracted through an evolutionary lens, the idea of institutions is not only salvageable but essential because institutions evolve to resolve in response to collective problems encountered by populations organizing within a given environment.

We need not drag out the long-rejected notion of functional needs or requisites; rather, we can repurpose the idea of needs or requisites to emphasize that humans always face adaptive problems in a given environment, even the sociocultural environment of their own making. Institutional analysis is thus the analysis of fundamental *human concerns* as they adapt to ever changing environments. At the individual level, our evolved cognitive and affective capacities appear to have made a set of concerns salient, like justice, power, and belongingness. At the social level, once we began organizing into larger groups, solutions to any one of these concerns could become patterned, enduring, and the core organizing principle around which divisions of labor came to be arranged. Institutional spheres, then, are the outcome of the institutionalization, through acts of

agency, of solutions to the fundamental concerns of humans as they adapt to diverse environments, both ecological and sociocultural; and these acts lead to the building up of social structural cultural formations that regulate human thought, action, and organization.

For instance, in Chapters 7 and 8 we examine the selection pressures that drove human societies 10,000 years ago, and then again 5,000 years ago, to begin carving out political space vis-à-vis kinship space. At first, the lines were enormously blurry, as chiefdom remained deeply embedded structurally and culturally within patrilineal kinship organization. Power remained a concern tied closely to loyalty, a concern closely aligned with kinship. But, as the number of exigencies grew, the conditions for distinguishing polity structurally, culturally, and phenomenologically grew concomitant. With this autonomous political sphere came the shift of power—as a concern and as a resource—from kinship to polity. That is, power came to be the central organizing principle for organizational fields, organizations, and individual role/status positions; it became a generalized currency for communication, exchange, and interaction between increasingly impersonal, generalized networks of individual and collective actors who either spent the majority of their time oriented towards politics or who sought out the goods or services the polity offered.

This example, however, points us to the truth behind our fourth myth. Economy was not the first institution; rather kinship was the first human institution with economy fully embedded in its structure and culture. Moreover, economy was not even the first institutoinal sphere to become autonomous from kinship; rather polity more autonomous before religion, economy, and law. Moreover, yet another myth is that biology is irrelevant to sociocultural evolution, but as we will argue, biological and neurobiological evolution were the driving forces making institutional systems possible in the first place, and they still are very much affected by the evolution and successive movement to relative autonomy of each institutional sphere organizing a society. Such considerations go against the grain of most sociological subfields and limitations of “the sociological imagination.” In this book, however, we intend to demonstrate how insights gleaned from other sciences can inform sociological level of analysis, without sacrificing the obvious point that the sociocultural and biotic universes constitute different realities.

Myth 4: Our Biology is Neither Determining nor Relevant Today

Since Durkheim’s (1895) *Rules of the Sociological Method*, sociology has continuously drawn strong boundaries between itself and the things that go on inside of the human organism.¹ Though evolutionary thought has

nearly always had a place in sociology, it is not without challenge, anxiety, and, in some corners, distaste. Given the subject matter of this book—macro structural and cultural spheres of action—one might ask why this myth and its debunking even matter. Above, we've already claimed that institutions are real, emergent social phenomena that are not reducible to the individual level. So, why are we interested in evolution? There are three answers to this question that combine to stake out one of the main goals of this book.

First, all social organization is predicated on our evolved capacities and dispositions in humans' biology. Sociologists are not unique among most humans who struggle with the practical and theoretic consequences of seeing humans as animals. It is one thing to recognize and believe in evolution, but an entirely different thing to internalize what that means for a social science. We believe it is long past time to be clear about what we can learn from our mammalian heritage and, especially, our primate and ape heritage. In Chapter 1, we dig into the evolution of social organization by way of natural selection working on our bodies and our brains. We consider what other ape societies (at least three of the four remaining Great Apes) look like and what that teaches us about the earliest human societies some 300,000 years ago. Humans are incredibly flexible animals, having been able to colonize just about every ecological niche on the planet. And, yet, what we find is there are also some delimitations to what is possible.

Second, while natural selection clearly plays a major role in the construction of the earliest human societies, we agree with an array of evolutionary scholars who emphasize the co-evolution, eventually, between genes and culture (Richerson and Boyd 2005; Richerson and Christiansen 2013), although this approach often assumes too much interaction between genes and culture. However, we also diverge from this group by proposing *two separate types of evolutionary processes*. The first is Darwinian, which recognizes some social evolution benefited the biological reproduction of humans, and still does today, but far more important are the sociocultural formations generated by humans with large brains and capacities for language and culture creation. For instance, that kinship continues to survive, as does its basic organizational unit, the family, we can be assured kinship was created in response to selection pressures for protecting the human genome and allowing for reproduction; and while such is still the case, kinship as an institution reveals emergent properties that are responses to different kinds of selection pressure emanating from adaptive problems in the organization of humans. The result is that we must shift to sociocultural evolution, which operates through selection but is still fundamentally different than biological evolution. This second type of evolution thus

shifts the focus from the individual to the social; and though just about any social unit—an organization, community, and so forth—can be a unit of evolution, we argue that institutions are one of the most important units of evolution. Both types of evolution work on selection pressures, but the latter is unique and more Lamarckian than Darwinian. One of the most important changes that occurs once an institutional sphere is created is that the human environment becomes more complex because humans are constantly creating and changing the environments to which they must adapt. Humans change not only the bio-ecology of their existence; they are also constantly changing the sociocultural environment to which they must adapt. Not only do humans have to contend with ecological change, but the environment itself becomes a self-reflexive sphere in which the second type of evolution may proceed. It is, to be sure, out of fashion to think in terms of systems (Luhmann 1995), but the fact of the matter is that as human institutions grow more differentiated and autonomous, they become the primary environments for social behavior and social change. Consequently, we outline in Chapters 2 and 3, the evolutionary process by which institutions evolve and adapt.

And this process brings us to the third point: whenever any animal congregates and whenever its population grows in size and density, it puts pressure on its ecological space, creating problems that must be resolved. Institutional spheres are, in one sense, the repositories for these solutions. In a much larger sense, however, institutions deal with some of the most basic exigencies facing human biology and culture. Some of these problems are deeply rooted in our biology, like the apparent motivation to ensure exchanges are fair and just (Decety and Howard 2013; Decety and Yoder 2017). But, when collectivized, these individual problems become group problems, as they threaten the viability and solidarity of the group, and consequently, other motivations like belongingness (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Thus, the intersection of individual concerns and problems related to collective action and organization lay at the foundations of institutional spheres. In adhering to the Goldenweiser principle (1937) that posits *specific structural problems have only limited numbers of possible solutions*, we argue that there is a historical “phasing,” so to speak, by which certain individual and collective problems intersect and, thereby, certain institutions evolve towards greater differentiation and autonomy. By no means are we suggesting a stage model, as evolution can move in unpredictable ways. However, it is clear from historical, archaeological, and textual evidence that polity precedes all other institutions, besides kinship, in its strain towards greater autonomy (Chapters 7–8). Subsequently, we see religious evolution accelerate, culminating in the first autonomous religious spheres

around the middle to end of the first millennium BCE (Chapters 9–10). Finally, economy (Chapters 11 and 14) and law (Chapters 12–13) begin their evolutionary trajectories, entwined at times, and driving the other at other points.

Indeed, by looking first at the neurology and biology of institutional evolution and then teasing out unique sociocultural processes made possible by this neurology, we are able to produce a robust theory that avoids the trappings of reductionism, but gives our brains and bodies their rightful due. In addition, we add an emphasis on sociocultural evolution that eludes the biosociological ultimatum that evolution is individual, genomic, and about fitness only. This analysis also does something else unique: it challenges the final myth: the premodernity/modernity “break”—defined however the social scientist prefers—is a heuristic device that does more to distort than to improve our understanding and explanation of social change and organization.

Myth 5: Modernity Is Different From Everything Before It

Something curious happened when sociology elevated the classical canon to a hermetically sealed chamber: the widespread, taken-for-granted, and unproblematized belief that the last 150–250 years (or, perhaps since the nation-state in 1648) are radically different from the 300,000 years prior. Never mind the fact that it is unlikely that the human brain has evolved much, if at all, making our so-called stone-age predecessors cognitively and anatomically the same as modern humans. Never mind the fact that the problems facing political systems today (Fagan 1999, 2004) or the struggle between religion and other spheres are neither new nor radically different. Admittedly, the size and scale of both the problems and the potential tragedy is greater today than before, and the number and diversity of problems are, when studied in their detail and content, greater. However, floods, famines, pestilence, wars, ethnic and cultural inequality, and conflict have been around forever, and the solutions to these problems, though occasionally “new” and surprising, remain delimited. There is, as Weber, Marx, Durkheim, Spencer, and so forth argued, a lot to learn from the past. And, the needless retaining of old binaries like *Gemeinschaft* and *Gessellschaft* or premodernity and modernity do little for understanding; rather, they delimit what we should be studying.

Underneath the substantive concerns of this chapter lies a major meta-concern: to understand the rise of the West and the vast majority of major events labeled “modern,” one needs to understand the general and specific evolutionary patterns of the last 10,000 years. One could,

arbitrarily, point to any number of bifurcation points, or what German philosopher Karl Jaspers (1953) termed *axial* moments. Sociology, being a science of human societies forged amidst massive economic, political, and cultural change in the 19th century, “chose” what it saw as modernity. This book challenges these ideas by reviewing the pressures that led to human settling down for good; for erecting massive political systems that began to act apart from what was in the “best” interests of significant portions of the population; for widening the conception of the moral community to which values and norms should apply; and, to reducing conflict between impersonal and depersonalized social relationships that would otherwise be impossible because of geographic, cultural, and social distances.

In so doing, we revise two classical conventions. First, we return to the social scientific preoccupation with *origins* stories. Relying on a wide variety of data sources and scientific disciplines, we posit a speculative, yet deeply informed and plausible, theory for the origins of kinship (and, thereby, human societies). As we move from one institution to the next, we return to the question of neurobiology and cognitive science, asking what are the origins of each of these spheres? From there, we ask what did economy or polity look like in the earliest foraging societies? Again, we draw from a wide range of sources, some lost in the “mists of time,” others on the cutting edge of evolutionary sciences. Once established, we ask one final question: why and how did a given institutional sphere become autonomous (and, of course, what were the consequences)? Thus, we are interested in a much deeper and broader evolutionary story of the origins of human societies and each institution that we examine. We end at the cusp of modernity, having established just how much continuity there is between the supposed premodern era and the next stage. Secondly, this narrative returns to the classic question: why the West? Instead, however, of pointing to a revolutionary moment, like the Protestant Reformation, we illustrate the gradual, multi-linear, sometimes truncated path the West and the rest of the world took to get to contemporary social life. If anything, the collapse of Rome *was the most powerful moment* in Western evolution, leaving a massive hole in the structural and cultural infrastructure of Europe; a gap that presented opportunities for the religious and kinship spheres’ entrepreneurs to grow autonomously in radical ways.

The Structure of an Institutional Analysis

The organization of the book can be conceptualized in three movements. The first begins with the evolution of hominids and humans (Chapter 1),

the unique nature of some types of sociocultural evolution (Chapter 2), and ends with a general theoretical model of institutions (Chapter 3) and their autonomy (Chapter 4). In this section, we examine the biogenetic roots of culture, pointing to the dispositions and characteristics that natural selection generated that provide the most purchase for institutions to emerge from and, eventually, take off as evolutionary forces in their own right. This section offers a chance to reflect on how we can synthesize insights from biological evolution without threatening a social science that studies the emergent properties and dynamics of non-biological phenomenon. Following this, we describe in great detail what institutions are, what they do, and how they too evolve. The cornerstone of this section is the functionalist argument, repurposed and rehabilitated, that institutional spheres become evolutionary forces. That is, for most of hominin evolution, it was the biotic environment that acted on our phenotypes as the Modern Synthesis supposes. But, with the first institution (kinship) becoming an external force, *sui generis*, it too became an environment in which individual and, more importantly, collective adaptation occurred. With each new layer of institutional evolution (polity, religion, law, and economy), the number of environments and unique sociocultural selection pressures grew, leading to both greater risks for human survival *and* greater opportunities for creativity and growth.

In the second movement, we shift our focus from the more abstract parts of the argument, to increasingly concrete delineations of each institution in its chronological order of autonomous evolution. We begin with kinship, describing what it is (Chapter 5) and why it evolved towards greater complexity (Chapter 6). Reaching its adaptive limits, Chapters 7 and 8 turn to the first autonomous institution besides kinship, polity. Again, we begin by thinking about the biological roots of polity, highlighting the limitations to a purely biogenetic theory of political evolution, and then describe the polity as an adaptive structural and cultural phenomenon. Following this, we turn to the evolutionary forces driving its growth in autonomy and the consequences autonomy had for other institutions, including kinship. This organizational strategy is repeated with religion (Chapters 9 and 10), and in a different sense, with law (Chapter 11 and 14) and economy (Chapter 12 and 13). This movement ends where modernity begins, arguing that much of what sociology accepts as its common historiography—whether Weber’s Protestant Reformation as birth of modernity or Marx’s industrial revolution—is really just a continuous process that stretches back some 10,000 years with the explosion of sedentary populations.

The book’s third movement concludes with a detailed examination of the interrelationship between institutions and the other great building block

of human societies: *stratification systems*. Though we make connections throughout, we devote time to fully unlocking a modified theory of stratification that places generalized symbolic media at the core of intra-institutional stratification. In the final chapter, we turn to both summary and exposition. We review, briefly, where we've been and examine more closely the contention that modernity is an extension or continuation of the past rather than a radical break as Durkheim, Simmel, Weber, Bourdieu, and so many others infer or explicitly argue. We leave the reader with the sense that more work is necessary; work that explains how and why medicine, science, education, media, and, to a lesser degree, entertainment became autonomous institutions over the last two and a half centuries.

Note

- 1 Durkheim's mentors were, however, very interested in biology; and while Durkheim in his early career assumed a rather extreme sociologistic stance in order to legitimate sociology as an academic discipline, his later work on religion and ritual was much more willing to deal with human psychology and even biology. Thus, after 1895, Durkheim changed his mind about much of his earlier advocacy (see Maryanski 2018).