The Active Society Revisited

Edited by
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Chapter 4

The Cybernetic Institutionalist

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Sociologists have long been impressed with the durability of human behavior patterns. Consequently, sociologists and other social scientists have developed theories of these durable action patterns under the rubric of "institutional theory," which has now become an accepted part of the sociological landscape. This chapter examines The Active Society within the context of institutional theory as it has developed in organizational analysis. My principal argument in this chapter is that The Active Society's strengths and weaknesses as a theory of social organization and collective action come from its combination of institutional analysis and cybernetic theory. Etzioni's basic framework is Parsons', but he also uses concepts from cybernetic theory, the area of engineering addressing the control of complex mechanical and electronic systems. The virtue of Etzioni's approach is the introduction of knowledge and consciousness into the analysis of social systems. The resulting theory of societal control raises interesting new questions for institutional theory and organizational analysis and presents an unexplored avenue in social theory.

I also argue that The Active Society has drawbacks stemming from its roots in an older institutional theory. Earlier sociologists saw the interaction between organizations and institutions as "local" phenomena. Bureaucracies were thought to be embedded within communities having their own customs, habits, and institutions, with which administrators had to contend. Like these sociologists, The Active Society sees organizations as part of a larger community, but it takes a more global
stance. Following Parsons, Etzioni uses a structural functionalist perspective: organizations are part of a larger social system that collects information, makes decisions, and mobilizes resources. Social elites set an organization's goals, and interorganizational networks coordinate activities and mobilize resources. Organizations in *The Active Society* are seamlessly integrated in the larger social order, and there is little conflict between managers and those who enforce institutionalized practices.

The key insight of contemporary institutional theory is the recognition that organizations and institutions belong to a larger cognitive order and that managers within bureaucracies are constantly negotiating their status with elites who enforce this order. The tension between those within an organization and the wider social environment is absent in Etzioni's work, as is any discussion of the values, norms, and practices that administrators can appeal to when they search for legitimacy. For Etzioni, the implementation of collective decisions is relatively unproblematic, a shortcoming highlighted by current institutional theory.

This chapter also seeks to refine and extend institutional analyses. Etzioni's work contains ideas and insights that can address problematic aspects of current institutional theories. A common criticism of contemporary institutionalism is that it leaves little room for change and instability; the social world is one in which individuals and organizations are trapped in a larger social environment filled with incentives for conformity. Yet social change occurs frequently. Etzioni's emphasis on the options that decision makers have and on the interplay between stocks of knowledge and reality shows where institutional change might come from and how it might play out. A review of *The Active Society* can help reformulate institutionalist theories in ways that might remedy gaps in the theory.

**Melding Institutionalism and Cybernetics**

*The Active Society*'s contribution to sociological theory is its unusual combination of institutional theory and cybernetics, which allows Etzioni to ascribe intentionality to collective action. Most institutionalist theories assume that individuals are only vaguely aware of the processes leading to the emergence of institutions and organizations. Most theories, especially early institutional theories, imagine institutions as having a "taken-for-granted" character. In these theories, individuals assume that action patterns—such as marriage or the recognition of property rights—are immutable, permanent entities that govern behavior. Organizations exist in an environment filled with institutions, and organizational participants must tailor their behavior so that they may be perceived as legitimate. The conclusion of most institutional theories in organizational analysis is that organizations are epiphenomena of a deeper social and normative social order.

Etzioni's theory of collective action takes a different approach. Organizations are embedded in a larger social system embodied by institutions, but organizational behavior is not a cautious reaction to these institutions. Instead, organizational leaders implement decisions made by elites, who are part of a system of information collection, decision making, and action. Thus, the social system described by Etzioni is an intentional construction, not an unconscious manifestation of values. The social system has a sort of awareness of its environment, an idea not found in earlier institutional analyses.

To appreciate this contribution, this section describes the work of three scholars—William Graham Sumner, Philip Selznick, and Talcott Parsons—who were instrumental in shaping institutional sociology and organizational analysis before *The Active Society*. I situate *The Active Society* within that tradition. I start with William Graham Sumner because his institutional analysis leaves little room for conscious social action of the type that Etzioni describes. The strength of community mores and institutions renders public administration futile. Selznick has a different approach, yet comes to a similarly pessimistic conclusion: ties between a bureaucracy and its political environment are so important that managers would rather change the organization's goals than lose legitimacy. Parsons has a more global approach. For him, the key issue is an organization's adherence to what is "good" or ethical—and institutions are the behavioral embodiment of these values. Etzioni's theory of society as a system of information collection and knowledge construction retains Parsons' systemic view and does not relegate organizations to cautious followers of public opinion. Organizations are elements of a larger system of social control and mobilization.

William Graham Sumner's writings on habits, sentiments, and communities are perhaps the earliest institutionalist theories to gain currency among sociologists. *Folkways* describes the emergence of habits and customs that were "original and primitive." These customs and habits grew from a collective need to survive and develop into a "mass phenomena"; they were basic practices that the group needed to develop and maintain for survival. Sumner's analysis of custom echoes later thinking about institutions as created through practice and day-to-day interaction. For example, Sumner states that "folkways" are produced by the "frequent repetition" of "petty acts, often by great numbers acting in concert or at least, acting in the same way when face to face with the same need." Some customs evolved a more formal structure, which he called "institutions." Sumner defines an institution as a "concept (idea, notion, doctrine, interest) and structure." The "structure" is a "framework, or apparatus, perhaps only a number of functionaries set to cooperate in prescribed ways at a certain conjunction." This definition includes many aspects of institutions found in contemporary discussions. "Framework," presumably, refers to sets of beliefs or ideas that coordinate action—a term referring to the cognitive dimension of institutions—and "functionaries" likely denotes individuals in specific roles who govern the prescribed behavior, which
refers more to formal social organization (see chapter 1). In an interesting passage, Sumner also identifies an aspect of institutions similar to “taken-for-grantedness”: individuals do not attach emotions to institutions; they become impersonal and detached from emotion. Often, institutions emerge from mores, which often means that their origins are “lost in mystery” and acquire an aura of ageless permanence.9

Sumner provides a discussion of organization and politics based on his notion of folkways, mores, and institutions. He argues that statecraft and public administration are outside the scope of mores and folkways because it is difficult for the state to administer such deeply felt, emotionally laden behaviors. Sudden change can happen only if the community is ready to accept it. Sumner notes that voluntary institutions can influence behavior, but in haphazard ways.10 His analysis is almost lawyerly; he says that the best influence is best asserted through careful deliberation of individual cases, which set the tone for future decisions. He then argues that the sentiments underlying so much of law and formal reasons are hard to escape. He illustrates this point by saying that if he had lived at the time of the Salem witch trials, he probably would have internalized the emotions and customs of the era and would have come to the same conclusion as the judges at the trial.11 The implication of this argument is that law, administration, and reform efforts are so embedded in cultural understandings and local practice that administration and reform can occur only incrementally and episodically. Change and mobilization are unlikely to occur if they conflict with deeply felt emotions, practices, and institutions.

After Sumner wrote Folkways, Max Weber delineated some of the basic concepts of modern organizational analysis.12 Unlike Sumner, Weber was less concerned with informal, locally constituted practices. He was more concerned with formal bureaucracies, which Mannheim later called the “rationally ordered system.”13 For Weber, the key to understanding the bureaucracy was the fact that individuals were trying to achieve a goal by performing tasks coordinated by written rules. Weber's analysis focused on the nature of authority and the internal dynamics of bureaucracies. In a sense, Weber and Sumner are complementary. Weber's theory is about conscious action, action that is often impersonal and explicitly designed, while Sumner's theory is about how affect and emotion create stable action patterns.

Organizational sociologists soon combined the insights of Sumner's institutional arguments with Weber's analysis of bureaucracy: bureaucracies were seen to be embedded in larger social groups, and the decisions made by workers and managers were influenced by ties to persons outside the organization. The larger community and its mores and institutions provided the context for decision-making. Robert Merton was an exponent of this view. In his article “Bureaucratic Personality and Social Structure,” Merton argues for a departure from the purely positive study of bureaucracy that viewed administrative agencies as well-ordered behavioral systems. Instead, he sees the bureaucrat as a hybrid, combining the demands of the bureaucracy with the sentiments, emotions, and practices imported from the outside community. For Merton, the bureaucrat is a “horrid hybrid,” torn between the demands of affect and the demands of rationality.14

Selznick’s TVA and the Grass Roots is the most striking and well-known empirical application of these ideas.15 Selznick studied the interaction between administrators in a federal agency and their political constituents. Selznick's crucial point is that a bureaucracy's formally stated goals are often replaced by the goals promoted by political elites. Organizational managers are very sensitive to the need for the legitimacy that community elites can grant. Theoretically, Selznick modifies Weber’s framework and maintains the view that bureaucracies are designed to achieve goals, but insists that the goals themselves can come from a variety of sources. Bureaucracies are embedded in larger environments, which might send contradictory signals to administrators. Selznick calls this process the “co-optation” of bureaucracy by local political elites. Selznick’s description of goal displacement and co-optation became a staple of organizational theory in the 1950s and 1960s and inspired other studies of co-opted bureaucracies.

Talcott Parsons further developed Selznick’s style of organizational theory, which melded a concern with organizational goals with an analysis of the bureaucracy’s immediate political and social environment. In 1956, Parsons outlined a theory of organizations that would set the tone for later work in organizational sociology. Parsons' sociology of the organization was in line with his previous writings on general social systems theory: organizations are social systems with subunits dedicated to setting and attaining goals. Like Selznick, Parsons was concerned with how bureaucracies fit into a larger community, but he shifted the focus from the relations that managers have with political elites to how the rules governing work within an organization compare to what is considered legitimate. The sociology of organizations should address how individuals inside an organization satisfy the demands of outsiders who define what is legitimate. Parsons argued that an organization’s stated goals and practices must be compatible with social values and institutions:

The problem concerns rather the compatibility of the institutional patterns under which the organization operates with those of other organizations and social units, as related to the integrated exigencies of the whole (or of subsystems wider than the organization in question). It is hence in one aspect a question of the generalizability of the patterns of the procedure adopted in the particular organization and hence their permissibility from a wider social point of view.16

Contracts governing behavior within the organization—what might now be called its internal structure—must be perceived as acceptable. Acceptable does not merely mean legal; it also means ethical:
The essential point is that the conduct of the affairs of an organization must in general conform with the norms of “good conduct” as recognized and institutionalized in society. The most general principle is that no one may legitimately contract to violate these norms, nor may authority be used to coerce people into their violation.17

The Parsonsian perspective on organizations and institutions is an alternative to Sumner’s position, in which a community’s mores severely constrain administrative behavior, and to Selznick’s, which emphasizes political negotiation. The Parsonsian perspective puts the larger society and its values in the dominant position; managers must create organizational routines and practices that do not conflict with what is acceptable in the larger community.

Like these previous authors, The Active Society focuses on the question of how communities and bureaucracies interact. Instead of seeing bureaucracies as embedded within communities, as Sumner and Selznick might, Etzioni takes a global approach, identifying formal organization as an expression of collective will and the tool for carrying out change. This is a natural extension of Parsons’ perspective, which puts the society at the center of social analysis, but with an important difference. For Parsons, the organization is a small island of activity inside a larger normative order, while for Etzioni, the organization is a natural expression of the larger collectivity’s desire for change. Consider Etzioni’s discussion of an organization. Starting from the definition of a collectivity as “a macroscopic unit that has a potential capacity to act by drawing a set of macroscopic normative bonds which tie members of a stratification category,”18 Etzioni discusses the organization as the very way that a collectivity “rises” or “demands” change.19

Collectivities without formal organizations are weak:

In short, from the viewpoint of a theory of societal guidance, a collectivity without organization is passive. While an increase in its associational activities may increase its cohesion and, thus, its action potential, such an increase by itself does not enlarge the collectivity’s actual societal impact. Analysis of organizational processing is essential for determining how much of the potential impact is actualized and what forces and processes account for the magnitude of the proportion.20

The social system is not integrated because managers and organizational leaders legitimize their activities in reference to a larger group; instead the social system is coherent because organizations are manifestations of mass beliefs and preferences.

The Active Society’s main contribution is not the emphasis on the organization as a tool for collective action; social scientists and political writers have made this argument many times over. It is the introduction of collective knowledge into theories of organizations and institutions. Early in the text, Etzioni notes that most, if not all, of the major surveys of sociological thought do not consider the role of collective belief and knowledge in collective action.21 Organizations in The Active Society are part of a larger cycle of collective information processing, reality testing, and decision-making. In Etzioni’s theory, an “overlay” collects information and makes decisions for the entire community.22 An “elite” is a “societal control center”23 that “specializes in the cybernetic functions of knowledge processing and decision-making, and in issuing controlling signals for societal units.” There is also an “underlayer” implementing the decisions made by elites.24 The feedback loop—in which information is collected, decisions are made, actions are taken, and new information is gathered—binds the entire system together.

This model of a collectivity is borrowed from cybernetic theory, a term denoting the theory of how systems of interacting parts (circuits, social organizations, biological organisms, etc.) maintain order and perform tasks.25 During the 1950s and early 1960s, cybernetic theory was gaining a large following in a range of academic disciplines including mathematics, biology, and management studies. The word itself, coined by Norbert Weiner in 1949, comes from “kubernetes,” the Greek word for rudder. Etzioni seems to be drawing heavily from a version of cybernetic theory known as the “systems approach,” which views any social, biological, or physical system as existing within a larger environment. The system has outputs affecting future input from the environment. Etzioni’s appropriation of systems theory is most evident in his discussion of cybernetic factors of societal guidance. Summarizing his entire argument, the diagram on page 133 of The Active Society shows how the collectivity is connected to the outside environment, with a specialized “knowledge unit” testing the accuracy or usefulness of current stocks of knowledge. Knowledge units themselves have structure composed of the views espoused by intellectuals and experts, which are then sorted by political elites.26 Networks between organizations mobilize individuals so that there is interaction with the environment, which later affects decision-making.

Etzioni fleshed out his cybernetic social theory with additional concepts taken from contemporary decision-making theories. For example, The Active Society reconciles two theories of organizational decision making by introducing the concept of “mixed-scanning.”27 At the time, there were two popular descriptions of social decision-making: instrumental rationality and incrementalism. Etzioni claims that they fail to capture the social process he is describing. Instead, he divides decisions into two categories: “fundamental issues” governed by careful consideration of all options, and incrementalism governing decisions about “details” of larger decisions. The theory that decisions are governed by two styles of thought is a blend of two broad strands of thought in organization studies: theories of rationality described in Cyert and March and in March and Simon,28 and theories of incrementalism, as found in the works of many social theorists.

In his discussion of the factors that contribute to successful decision making, Etzioni points to the importance of “slack,” which are resources that can be applied to any circumstance.29 This idea has proved crucial to many organizational
Theories, such as the “garbage can” theory of decision-making and some styles of bounded rationality theory, which needed an explanation of how administrators coped with unexpected events and other types of uncertainty. Another example of Etzioni’s use of organizational theory is the discussion of “lead time” in decision-making. Utilizing concepts of sequential decision-making, Etzioni notes that decision makers have more freedom when they are cognizant of the long-term impacts of their actions. Those persons who attempt to understand the consequences of their actions will see that they can create the conditions necessary for later, more desirable outcomes.

Etzioni’s emphasis on control and information is an interesting reworking of some institutionalist ideas. Parsons, in particular, had moved in a direction similar to Etzioni’s. In his later works, Parsons had become interested not only in how societies maintain certain cultural patterns and systems of stratification, but also in the interaction between a social group and its physical environment. Instead of talking about controlling “overlayers,” Parsons discusses a “hierarchy of cybernetic control.” However, the elements of Parsons’ theory differ from Etzioni’s. For example, Parsons is more concerned with the match between different levels of the social system, such as the consistency of personality with institutions maintaining cultural patterns. For Parsons, social change is about the interaction of these different levels of the social system, with the outcome of social change depending on how higher cybernetic levels control change at lower levels. By contrast, Etzioni is less concerned with these interactions and more concerned with the collective creation of knowledge and “reality testing.” A key point for Etzioni is that societies are constantly establishing a relationship with an ultimate reality, constantly testing their collective representation of the world, a process Parsons does not discuss.

The ideas in The Active Society suggest a kind of social theory centered around ideas, information, and decisions. Organizations, networks, and institutions play a secondary role. The cycle of information, decisions, and action suggests a theory of collective consciousness similar to that of the connectionist school of artificial intelligence researchers, who model intelligent behaviors as an emergent property of systems in which connected units exchange, collect, and combine information. Much like Etzioni, connectionists see artificial intelligence systems as having a controlling overlayer that makes final rule-based decisions using information provided by other units. This approach to theorizing about decision making, social action, and organizations has not been taken up by many contemporary theorists, which is not surprising given the move away from structural functionalism and Parsons’ legacy in recent social theory.

Yet Etzioni’s “cybernetic” institutionalism is quite distant from the institutionalism of Sumner, Selznick and Parsons. In retrospect, it seems hard to believe that a scholar working out of that tradition would ever formulate a theory of collective behavior that assigned such a high degree of intentionality to social change. Perhaps this is a sign of the times: The Active Society appeared during the era of Civil Rights and Great Society. There was great belief in the power of organized social change, and the appearance of cybernetic theory at that time made it possible for social theorists, such as Etzioni and Parsons, to create a theory of conscious and controlled social change. This “cybernetic” institutionalism yielded a theory that would resemble, in its broad outlines, theories of artificial intelligence. This avenue has not been explored much in current social theory, except by a handful of organizational researchers who treat organizations as collections of interacting units. Further discussion of the ideas in The Active Society should consider the extent of this analogy, if, indeed, an “active” society really can sort through information and make rational decisions.

The New Institutional Analysis

The Active Society might appear unusual and possibly opaque to a modern sociologist. Identifying parts of a community as “overlayer” or “underlayer” might seem too close to a now unpopular structural functionalism, and the discussion of cybernetics, slack, and mixed-scanning appears obscure except to those familiar with the specialized organizational sociology literature dealing with these topics. On a deeper lever, The Active Society might strike a contemporary reader as strange because institutional and organizational theory has moved in new directions. The last thirty years have witnessed a proliferation of “new institutional” theories, each with its own terms, research questions, and hypotheses. Often, the older institutional theories of Selznick and Parsons have receded into the background, triggering pleas for a return to older institutionalist themes. Replacing them are discussions of “organizational fields,” “collective isomorphism,” and “logic.” This section discusses how institutionalism has changed since The Active Society was published and how a neoinstitutionalist perspective might improve its theoretical framework.

A common starting point of neoinstitutional analysis is Stinchcombe’s (1965) observation that organizations reflect the era in which they were created. The owners or managers of a firm must construct an organization so that it can effectively acquire resources from its social and physical environment. As a result, organizations in a given industry resemble each other because they were exposed to similar environments and continue to bear the marks of the environment in which they were created. Stinchcombe describes the process:

Organizational types generally originate rapidly in a relatively short historical period, to grow and change slowly after that period... The explanation is that organizations are founded at a particular time must construct their social systems with the social resources available. Particularly, they have to build their elites
so that they can recruit necessary resources from the society and to build the structure of their organizations so that in the historically given labor market they recruit skills and motivations of workers.36

The transmission of norms and practices from the environment into the organization has been called “environmental imprinting,” a key concept in modern institutional theories.

Neoinstitutionalism took shape more fully in the writings of John Meyer, Paul DiMaggio, Ron Jepperson, Walter Powell, and others. Following Stinchcombe, a common theme running through these diverse writers is that organizations are very sensitive to their political and social environment. However, institutionalists differ in how they think managers deal with this pressure. For some scholars, organizations are constantly sending signals to donors and political constituents to show acceptance of social norms. Organizational life is about “myths and ceremonies” that allow organizational participants to continue their work unmolested by external political actors.37 Karl Wieck developed the most elaborate version of this theory when he introduced the concept of “loose coupling,” in which organizational participants work according to their own goals, with administrators responsible for maintaining the legitimacy of the organization in the wider environment.38 Not only do some individuals placate outsiders, but the “core” of the organization can become well insulated from its political environment. This is the opposite of Etzioni’s perspective: organizations are not extensions of collective desire for change and action; they are islands of efficient work shielded from the polity by elaborate bureaucracies.

DiMaggio and Powell’s institutionalism takes a different course. In their 1983 article, they focus on the evolution of “fields,” which are collections of organizations doing a certain kind of work (i.e., hospitals, museums, legislatures).39 The essence of this approach is that fields have their own “logic” represented by certain organizational structures and practices. A sector of the economy is populated by organizations with the same internal structure and the same routines. According to DiMaggio and Powell, this is because organizations in a given field are bound by similar institutions, which are enforced by various parties, such as occupational groups and government agencies. The regulated practices become taken for granted and gain legitimacy. Thus, a field embodies a sort of collective belief about the status of these organizations, with enforcers acting as “institutional carriers.”

This strand of institutional theory has developed in new directions. Some recent theorizing focuses on “collective logics,” i.e., the ways in which belief systems frame decision-making.40 In that tradition, the goal is to show how occupational groups and organizational participants justify their actions with different criteria. “Logic” often includes a notion of salience and a classificatory scheme for action. Perhaps the most well-known advocates of this approach are James March and Johan Olsen, who, in Rediscovering Institutions: The Organizational

Basis of Politics,41 argue that a key political process involved the classification of persons and activities, who would then be subject to market forces or legal systems. A related argument can be found in Stryker’s research on bureaucratic politics, when she argues that the development of various government agencies can be traced to the resolution of conflicts over the agency’s mandate.42 The development of institutionalism in these varied directions—loose coupling theory, collective isomorphism, logics, and institutional frameworks—highlights gaps in The Active Society. There is no sense that organizations belong to populations with their own norms or of the tension between what organizational participants want and what they are expected to do by outsiders. When Etzioni addresses these issues, the discussion seems cursory. For instance, Etzioni uses the introduction of détente by the Kennedy administration as an example of the obstacles that elites might face in changing their environment.43 Etzioni’s key point is that President Kennedy engaged in an extensive process of redefining the context of foreign policy debates and was opposed by various political economic interests. This analysis restates the obvious: every significant policy change requires a change in the policy’s context and usually involves conflict with interested actors.

A more subtle and informative institutionalist analysis of the introduction of détente would focus on shifts in the structure of the political environment that gave the older foreign policy its durability. It might be useful to ask if the State Department was decoupled from the highest levels of the executive branch, or if the successful introduction of détente required a substantial change in the “logic” of the foreign policy bureaucracy. Following Laumann and Knoke, one could look at the network of actors and issues in the foreign policy arena.44 Which interest groups were the first to move in Kennedy’s direction, and what was their position in the domain of foreign policy? Were they peripheral or central actors? Did the movement of these actors change the status of foreign policy professionals or other occupational groups in the foreign policy domain who might have had a strong stake in the outcome of this debate? Did diplomats and State Department officials actually carry out the new policy, or, as loose coupling theory suggests, did they show adherence to the policy and then continue as they had before? How did the president actually monitor the acceptance of the new policy, aside from public opinion polls? There is no indication that the theory in The Active Society can address these issues.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of The Active Society is its grounding in the Parsonsian mode of analysis, in which social subunits exist to perform certain activities.45 The usefulness of the newer institutionalist perspective is its abandonment of the view of organizations as well-integrated subunits of the social system. The different institutionalisms assign varied roles to organizations, but none of them sees organizations as actors carrying out orders as part of a cybernetic hierarchy. As noted in the discussion of Kennedy and détente, there is little sense of
the often complex environment in which leaders and organizations exist. There is no sense of exactly how the state, professional groups, and organizations interact with each other. In *The Active Society*, the main role of the state is essentially to be a source of control. It is "more a mechanism of ‘downward’ political control than a mechanism of ‘upward’ societal consensus-formation." Although Etzioni notes that the state is a "supra-organization" in which other organizations exist, he does not describe at all how states control organizations in their domain or, as Laumann and Knoke describe, how organizations form networks that frame government policy making.

*The Active Society*'s understanding of organizational environments, including the state, might be a characteristic of its appearance before the "new" institutional analysis. For instance, Etzioni states that "control networks" tie social units into organizations and states. Institutionalists have moved away from the position that the organizational environment has a relatively small number of actors who assert control over organizations. Instead, organizational environments are now seen to contain professional groups, various state actors, political constituencies, and other organizations. Together, these form a complex social environment in which administrators learn what is appropriate and legal through ties to other professionals, interest groups, and the state. The network formed by these parties transmits information to participants and can act as a signal of status within the group. These ties also permit coordination of activities between firms and organizations that might otherwise be in conflict or competition. Summarizing this view, Walter Powell notes that the interorganizational network provides a form of organization distinct from the decentralized market or the hierarchy described in *The Active Society*.

A more contemporary understanding of networks might also enrich *The Active Society*’s theory of mobilization. The discussion of mobilization described in chapter 15 focuses only on the types of mobilization and its consequences. There is little discussion of how mobilization occurs, because Etzioni uses the term "mobilization" in the way that organizational theorists used it—as a decision made by organizational participants to appropriate a resource. According to Etzioni, mobilization of the type that we associate with social movements bears a strong resemblance to what happens in bureaucracies. As students of public goods know, there is much more to the issue because individuals may not have incentives to participate or give resources. Etzioni does not discuss the problems of coordination and recruitment that, as modern network theory indicates, networks are able to solve. For example, there is much empirical and theoretical research showing that persons can be recruited in movements and organizations through personal ties. Informal social networks also facilitate coordination of activities between geographically disparate movement organizations.

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**Different Paths of Development:**

**Information, Elite Action, and Institutional Change**

The previous section situated *The Active Society* within a broader tradition of institutional analysis and argued that some of the strengths and weaknesses of the book can be attributed to its roots in the sociology and cybernetic theory of the 1950s. While I argue that contemporary institutional theory draws attention to problems in *The Active Society*, I also believe that its framework is still relevant to institutional theory. Specifically, ideas about stocks of knowledge, reality testing, and the feedback loops of decision-making and action could help institutionalists counter the criticism that their theories fail to account for change, a charge that Clemens and Cook articulate in their review of institutionalist theory:

As a reaction against methodological individualism, technological determinism, and behavioralist models that highlight the flux of individual action or choice, the resurgence of institutionalist analysis in recent years has forcefully reminded social scientists of this "relative permanence of a distinctly social sort." . . . This important contribution has generated new puzzles. One challenge follows from institutionalism’s emphasis on enduring constraint. . . . Insofar as institutional arguments maintain that variation and change are minimized, those same arguments are ill suited to the explanation of change.

With respect to this issue, the most useful idea that Etzioni proposes may be the notion of "options," those possible plans of action that elites perceive. The very idea of an option moves us away from the emphasis on conformity and collective isomorphism. Instead of seeing industrial sectors or organizations as inevitable outcomes of institutionalizing forces or as the hybrid outcomes of multiple logics, they are one possible outcome of many that decision makers perceive. Decision makers in the overlayer of a community can envision possible courses of development and try to organize institutions so they move in a particular direction.

Where might these options come from? They come from the cybernetic cycle of information collection, decision-making, and reality testing. While I do not believe that communities are best viewed as organized around elites in "control centers," I do believe that highly influential individuals—those at the center of the networks described by Powell and Laumann and Knoke—interact with others in a way that generates new information, enabling them to formulate new strategies for action. New information might even lead to innovation and break the cycle of institutional reproduction. To borrow from DiMaggio and Powell, reality breaks the iron cage.

The observation that this cybernetic cycle might be an important element of institutional transformation has implications beyond the topic of institutionalism in organizational studies. For years, political scientists, economists, historians, and sociologists have grappled with path-dependence explanations, which assert
that institutions and organizations evolve along a fixed course because early historical conditions provide a template for social organization that is hard to change, for either economic or cognitive reasons. In path-dependence theories, change is often forced by outsiders, often in violent and abrupt ways.

The virtue of Etzioni's societal guidance theory is that institutional change is both internally and externally generated. Information received from outside the community acts as a stimulus for change, but the interpretation, processing, and response to this information is internal to the community. This suggests a useful classification of institutional change. When there is no new information motivating change and elites do nothing, then internal, institutionalizing dynamics play along a course set by early historical conditions. If elites commence change without stimulus from the wider environment, it might be labeled entrepreneurial. Presumably, elites see some advantage to change that others have not perceived. Elites who do not respond to new information negatively framing an organization or institution invite a crisis or the de-legitimization of the institution. The extreme case might involve the emergence of social movements intent on creating new institutions. Elites who do effectively respond to negative information about an existing institution enact piecemeal reforms of the institution.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action by elites?</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Negative input from the environment?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Path-dependent development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Crisis, erosion of the institution</td>
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*Diagram 1: Classification of Institutional Change by Information Stimulus and Elite Response.*

This perspective on institutional change follows naturally from *The Active Society*’s “cybernetic institutionalism” and shows how institutional theories can accommodate change. The key point is that combinations of information and action create situations of varying institutional character. For example, when there is no reframing of an institution—negative salient information does not appear in a community—and elites do not act, individuals are willing to let the “internal logic” of the institution play out. Because there is no activity around an institution or public questioning of it, the institution acquires its taken-for-granted character. This situation is quite common and probably motivates most theories of path-dependent institutional development.

The crucial role played by situations in setting the stage for the future of institutional change points to a series of questions for institutional theory. First, how exhaustive is this typology of institutional change? Are there common types of change that do not resemble the four archetypes presented in Diagram 1? Second, how tight is the link between the outcomes in Diagram 1 and the situations? Are revolutions and strong social movements necessarily preceded by a process in which individuals are persuaded that current political arrangements are unjust, as framing theorists such as McAdam and Snow and Benford might argue? Are there examples of revolutionary change occurring without an extensive framing process or new information about existing institutions? Finally, in this theory, how are the ingredients of situations—information and elite action—themselves structured by other institutions? For example, it might be argued plausibly that political and economic obligations might limit an elite’s ability to counter the de-legitimization of an institution. A further exploration of the issues raised by this model of institutional change would require a consideration of these questions.

**Conclusion**

A prominent theme in this essay is the tension between conscious behavior (“the active community”) and unconsciously built patterns of behavior (“institutions”). Earlier institutional theories, such as Sumner’s, describe a world filled with robust, durable patterns of behavior that are very difficult to control or change, a world in which organizations have to accommodate themselves to institutions or face de-legitimization. Etzioni’s theory of deliberate and conscious change stands in contrast to this tendency and is subject to criticism for assuming too much about how organizations respond to the elites in “control centers” who define goals for the community.

Despite these limitations, *The Active Society*’s cybernetic theory of the community contains insights leading to an interesting and much-needed theory of institutional change. I presented a typology of institutional change that organizes the circumstances under which institutions fail to be taken for granted and become open to question and change. The crucial ingredient of my analysis is the “situation,” combining information, legitimacy and action. This, I think, indicates an interesting step for institutional theorists to take. For many years, institutionalist scholars have claimed roots in the works of scholars such as Berger and Luckman, who focus on how shared notions of reality form a basis for the creation of organizations and institutions. The analysis I have presented shifts the focus to the modification and erosion of institutions, which depends on distinctive combination of information, action and frames. Through this theory, institutional theory can be more closely integrated with current research on the framing of political issues, elite responses, and the success and failure of social movements. Surprisingly, the theoretical path that might bridge social movement theory and organizational analysis might be found in works such as *The Active Society.*
Notes

1. I’d like to thank Richard Boyd, Wilson Carey McWilliams and others for their comments. All remaining errors are my own.


7. Ibid., 3.
8. Ibid., 53.
10. Ibid., 113, 117.
11. Ibid., 118.
17. Ibid., 84.
18. The Active Society, 98
19. Ibid., 103
20. Ibid., 104
21. Ibid., 77 ft
22. Ibid., 133
23. Ibid., 113
24. Ibid., 133
26. The Active Society, 187
27. Ibid., 284-285
29. The Active Society, 295
31. The Active Society, 296
34. Stuart J. Russell and Peter Norvig discuss systems that have this property, such as neural nets. Artificial Intelligence: A Modern Approach, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 2002.

43. The Active Society, 160-162


45. See, for example, page 105 of The Active Society, which illustrates associations and organizations as extensions of the collectivity. It should be noted that on p.104, Etzioni remarks that subunits, such as organizations and associations, vary in how much social consensus they need to act, implying that not all organizations carry out collectively defined goals. My point is that in The Active Society some important subunits exist to carry out certain activities, and that is an important and vital dimension of Etzioni's theory.

46. The Active Society, 107

47. Ibid., 106

48. Ibid., 110


50. The Active Society, 388


54. The Active Society, 80-83

55. DiMaggio and Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited."

