

# Why Education Policy Makers Continue to Reinvent the Broken Wheel: Re-Grounding the Ontological and Epistemological Foundations of Higher Educational Policy on Historical and Institutional Analysis

Josh M. Beach  
University of Texas, San Antonio

"The future always looks good in the golden land,  
because no one remembers the past."

-Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*

The sociologist of science asks questions the scientist can not afford to ask.

Stanley Fish, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech*

## **Introduction: Seeing Our Blindness**

As Thomas Kuhn (1996) has argued, scientific activity takes for granted an often unexamined paradigm that is historically contingent, and which grounds the validity and value of scientific research. The philosopher Kenneth Burke (1969; see also Beach, 2005) and Stanley Fish (1994) has demonstrated that epistemological paradigms (scientific or otherwise) can operate as a "trained incapacity," whereby epistemological assumptions filter perception allowing an individual or group to see certain aspects of the world while being blind to other aspects. Finally, philosophers, like Stanley Fish (1994), and historians of science (Berlin, 2000a;

Berlin, 2000b; Haskell, 1977), especially Steven Shapin (2010), have demonstrated the political and historically contingent circumstances that shape and constrain scientific practice and the validity and authority of scientifically produced "truth". In short, the paradigms and practices of scientists are historically conditioned and contingent, and therefore, subject to critical scrutiny in order to justify the validity and authority of scientifically produced research and the public policy this research informs. This critical inquiry of scientific epistemology is currently practiced by historians of science and sociologists of knowledge, among others.

I want to suggest that the social sciences, especially the fields of education and higher education, are biased toward the traditional scientific paradigms of positivism and rational choice theory, and that this bias conditions short-sided, ineffective, and sometimes damaging policy. This positivistic bias has been the subject of a recent and important debate over epistemological methods within the field of education, taking place primarily within the pages of *Educational Researcher* (Howe, 2009; Bredo, 2009; Johnson, 2009; Tillman, 2009; Koro-Ljungberg, et. al., 2009; Moss, et. al., 2009), but I have also raised this issue in a recent history of the community college in the United States (Beach, 2010).

In this paper I want to briefly explain the two dominant paradigms of positivism and rational choice theory within the social sciences (Howe, 2009; Steinmetz, 2005) and then suggest two important social scientific paradigms that could serve as correctives (history and neo-institutionalism), but which have been marginalized in the social sciences, especially in the fields of education and higher education. I want to explain the important insights of these two paradigms, how they radically destabilize current assumptions about social science and public policy. I also want to suggest how these two marginalized paradigms could help better inform a more effective, albeit limited, public policy.

## **I. The Epistemological Foundations of Modern Social Science and Public Policy**

Many social scientific fields, especially applied fields like education and public policy, are based on two naive forms of empiricism: positivism and rational choice theory. The basic epistemological premise of positivism (and its intellectual variants like logical positivism) is that social phenomenon and individual actors are rationally constituted and ordered into discrete, measurable, and malleable parts. Positivism also assumes a simplified causal relationship between these discrete parts, whereby, causes neatly produce effects, thereby, causal relationships can be manipulated by altering parts of the causal equation, which in turn will produce predicated effects (Howe, 2009; Klee 1999; for analysis and critique see Steinmetz, 2005). Rational choice theory (or utilitarianism) utilizes the epistemological assumptions of positivism and focuses specifically on the rational processes by which individual agents and social agencies determine action and anticipate outcomes based on that action (Becker, 1993; for analysis and critique see Sen, 1999; Sen, 2009).

Both positivism and rational choice theories ignore the questionable validity of their epistemological assumptions via the methods of the sociology of knowledge. They assume rationally constituted phenomena that are ordered into discrete, measurable, and malleable parts. They also assume direct causal relationships and discrete individual agents or social agencies. These assumptions fail to account for the complex ecologies of social and physical environments, the historically contingent structure and evolution of social institutions, and socially conditioned constitution of individual agents and social agencies. These paradigms assume an ahistorical social and physical environment that does not determine the present or future, and which accords a largely unrestricted degree of freedom to individual actors and social

agencies. Thus, positivism and rational choice theories use framework of rationality, utility maximization, order, and individual choice to reduce the complex condition of social environments, institutions, and individual agency in order to focus on the freedom of agents to act and how they structure decisions to reach desired outcomes. But what if social environments are not rationally organized? What if there are no discrete and measurably ordered parts to social phenomenon? What if individuals are not completely rational? What if freedom of choice is an illusion and individuals are not in complete control of their decisions? What if humans cannot predict and achieve desired outcomes?

These questions have been investigated for the past century, although more systematically over the past thirty years. The evidence that has been collected thus far threatens to destabilize the epistemological foundations on which the social sciences have been built, thus, precipitating a crisis of identity and purpose within the social sciences ("Is Social Science Hopeless," 2004; Steinmetz, 2005). Furthermore, it calls into question the processes and purposes of progressive public policy, which were created in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to reform and restructure nation states (Dawley, 1991). What if the very structure of progressive public policy is flawed, and thereby, ineffective at achieving policy outcomes on its own terms? What if the field of public policy is merely a rationalization or a myth masking historically contingent political phenomenon that have structured human societies for centuries?

The purpose of this paper is not to conclusively answer these questions for that would be impossible based on the evidence gathered to date. However, lack of evidence and solid answers should never disqualify the asking of difficult questions. In this paper I will briefly explore how the fields of history and institutional theory offer some preliminary answers, and what these answers may mean for social science and public policy, especially for the field of education.

## II. Institutions: How Historically Contingent Social Structures Mediate Individual Agency

The concept of social institutions is perhaps one of the most important issues being studied today. The idea of social institutions hurdles an unresolved social-scientific dualism that has been at the heart of social science for the past 150 years (Berlin, 2000; Dennett, 2003). There has been a fundamental debate over how social groups and social institutions<sup>1</sup> are constituted and how they change. Social groups (or societies) and social institutions can be seen, on the one hand, as the “product of human design” and the outcome of “purposive” human action. However, they can also be seen as the “result of human activity,” but “not necessarily the product of conscious design” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983/1991, p. 8; Friedland & Alford, 1991, pp. 232-63; Miller, 1993, p. 150; Searle, 1995).

For the past quarter century or so, many scholars at the frontiers of knowledge have rejected the idea that societies, institutions, organizations, and even the behavior of individuals can be reduced to rational decisions of actors, although purposive/intentional agents do play a role in shaping individual behavior and social structures. The new theory of institutions focuses mostly on larger units of analysis, like social groups and organizations “that cannot be reduced to aggregations or direct consequences of individual’s attributes or motives.” Individuals do constitute and perpetuate social structures and institutions, but they do so not as completely or as freely as they believe (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983/1991, p. 8; Friedland & Alford, 1991, pp. 232-63; Miller, 1993, p. 150; Searle, 1995).

The new institutional theory has focused mainly on how social organizations have been the locus of “institutionalization,” which is the formation and perpetuation of social institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> Institutions are the *ideas* (concepts - the "is" - and values - the "ought to be") and *social structures* (rituals, roles, norms, organizations) that constitute human thought, action, and society. Ideas and social structures are not discrete entities different aspects of a complex phenomenon.

While groups of human beings create and sustain social organizations, these organizations develop through time into structures that resist individual human control. Organizations also take on a life of their own that sometimes defies the intentions of those human beings directing the organization. While institutions can sometimes begin with the rational planning of individuals, the preservation and stability of institutions through “path dependent” processes (what we generally call “history”) is often predicated on ritualized routines, social conventions, norms, and myths.

Once an institution becomes “institutionalized” over time, the social structure perpetuates a “stickiness” that makes the structure “resistant” to change. Individual human actors, thereby, become enveloped and controlled by the organization’s self-reinforcing social norms, rules, and explanatory myths, which are solidified through positive feedback mechanisms that transcend any particular human individual. These organizational phenomena, thereby, shape individual human perception, constrain individual agency, and constitute individual action. As one institutional theorist has argued, all human “actors and their interests are institutionally constructed.” To a certain extent humans do create institutions and organizations, but more immediately over the course of history, institutions and organizations create us (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 15; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983/1991, pp. 20, 23, 26, 28; Lecours, 2005, pp. 3-25; Meyer & Rowan, 1991; Pierson, 2004, p. 20-21, 43, 51; Zucker, 1991, p. 85).

But if all human thought and action is constituted by previously existing institutions, do human beings really have any freedom to shape their lives or change society? This is actually a very hard question to answer and it remains at the center of longstanding debates in the human sciences (Berlin, 2000). Durkheim and Parsons seemed to solidify a sociology that left no room for individual volition. Marx stressed human control, but seemed to put agency in the hands of

groups and social structures, not individuals. Weber discussed the possibility of individual agency, especially for charismatic leaders, but he emphasized how human volition was always “caged” by institutions and social organizations. Michel Foucault (1984) conceptualized human beings as almost enslaved by the various modern institutions of prisons, schools, and professions. Isaiah Berlin and Anthony Giddens both acknowledge the totalizing determinism of social structures while still affording rational actors a great deal of choice within constrained environments (Berlin, 2000; Giddens, 1971). Socio-biologists, evolutionary psychologists, and analytical philosophers have offered compelling arguments to prove the validity of a deterministic universe, while still allowing for the *possibility* (but not certainty) of individual freedom (Dennett, 2003).

In the social sciences, neo-institutional theorists have also theorized the *possibility* of individual rationality and freedom, albeit constrained and mediated by social institutions. Human rationality is “bounded,” as Herbert Simon (1990) explained. Human agency can be defined as the utilization, manipulation, and modification of existing institutions. Human beings also *refuse* institutionalized norms and procedures, thereby, highlighting another type of agency. Humans can also *exploit contradictions* between different institutional structures, and use one institution to modify another. While human rationality does inform human agency, it is not sufficient for agency, nor does it necessarily control the means agency or its outcomes.

Ronald L. Jepperson (1991, pp. 145, 149, 151-52, 158) argues that there can be “degrees of institutionalization” as well as institutional “contradictions” with environmental conditions. This means that certain institutions can be “relative[ly] vulnerab[le] to social intervention” at particular historical junctures. Jepperson is one of the few institutional analysts who conceptualize a theory of human action and institutional change, which allows for

“deinstitutionalization” and “reinstitutionalization.” But Jepperson does not validate rational choice theories of individual agency. He argues instead that “actors cannot be represented as foundational elements of social structure” because their identity and “interests are highly institutional in their origins.” However, this position does not disavow institutionally mediated individual choice and action. As Walter W. Powell (1991, p. 188, 194-95) has argued, “individual preferences and choices cannot be understood apart from the larger cultural setting and historical period in which they are embedded,” but individual actors have some freedom within institutional environments to “use institutionalized rules and accounts to further their own ends.” Roger Friedland and Robert R. Alford (1991, pp. 232, 254) argue that “the meaning and relevance of symbols may be contested, even as they are shared.” “Constraints,” Powell paradoxically argued in one essay, “open up possibilities at the same time as they restrict or deny others.”

The anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner (2006) has developed a more comprehensive theory of human agency that allows individuals more power to consciously participate in, and thereby, shape and modify institutions. She describes the individual agent in a “relationship” with social structures. This relationship can be “transformative” on both parties: each acts and shapes the other. While the individual is enveloped by social structures, there is a “politics of agency,” where individual actors can become “differentially empowered” within the layered “web of relations” that make up the constraints of culture. Individuals can act through a process of reflexivity, resistance, and bricolage. Humans use an awareness of subjectivity and negotiate their acceptance and refusal of the status quo. Through this process, humans can re-create existing social structures by reforming traditional practices and also by introducing novel practices. Ortner conceptualized the process of agency as the playing of “serious games,”

utilizing a metaphor originally deployed by the analytical philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. She argued forcefully that existing cultural structures and social reproduction is “never total, always imperfect, and vulnerable,” which constantly leaves open the possibility of “social transformation” to those who dare to act out against the status quo (pp. 7, 18, 127, 130, 133, 139, 147, 152).

Traditionally, social scientists have not only assumed an inflated notion of rationality, agency, and control for human individuals, but social scientists have also assumed these same qualities for organizations as well: societies, political states, and economic corporations. Structural functionalist sociologists, using classical organizational theories, often conceptualized modern society as a highly structured and rationalized field populated by various bureaucratic organizations, with specific and clearly defined social functions. It was assumed that social organizations were driven by rationalized processes, efficient technologies, and controlling managers. Organizations were seen as a totalizing social structure that “use[d] human beings to perform organizational tasks.” Organizations were also seen as insulated structures, which were clearly differentiated and autonomous from the larger society (Jepperson & Meyer, 1991; March & Simon, 1993, p. 130; Meyer & Rowan, 1991; Pierson, 2004; Scott, 1992).

Later organizational theorists, still embracing a structural functionalism, pointed out how organizations were only quasi-rational and largely constrained by other social structures. These new organizational theorists also pointed out that the functions of an organization were often “loosely coupled” or in “conflict” with its actual operations. Organizational actors could be “limited in their knowledge and in their capacities,” and thus, merely “‘subjectively’ rational.” This meant that individuals, even corporate managers, were not in complete control of themselves, let alone their organizations. This led some organizational theorists to describe

social organizations as “anarchical,” because nobody seemed to be in complete control, but yet the organization did seem to function because it was not falling apart (Weick, 1976; March & Simon, 1993, pp. 157, 159; Cohen & March, 2000). Organizations also came to be seen not as isolated entities, but as connected to and influenced by other organizations and larger social structures, like the state or the regional economy (Myer & Rowan, 1991; Scott & Meyer, 1991; Skocpol, 1985).

The new institutionalism took this quasi-rational and constrained line of analysis even further. New research has shown that social organizations are more often structured by “the myths of their institutional environments” than they are by the functional “demands of their work activities.” This insight is especially apt for the study of community colleges. In fact, the supposedly functional technology of modern organizations in the post-industrial West have come to be seen as not very functional and not very efficient. Instead of an objective system of rationality, organizations are now seen to be ordered by “myths” of rationality that “codify” various “institutional rules” based on the “authoritative” normative design and isomorphic power of “rationalized bureaucracies.” Thus, neo institutional theorists argue that organizations are driven by social “legitimacy” and “survival” within an “institutional environment,” instead of rationality and productivity, especially organizations like schools and churches, which operate in highly “institutional environments.” Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell have argued, “Organizations compete not just for resources and customers, but for political power and institutional legitimacy, for social as well as economic fitness.” Under such circumstances, managers do not necessarily control production or efficiency, but instead are often “ceremonial” figures who preside over a “loosely coupled” organization driven by the assumption that “everyone is acting in good faith” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991, pp. 66, 68; Meyer & Rowan,

1991, pp. 41, 44-46, 48-50, 60; Scott, 1992, p. 176; Scott & Meyer, 1991, pp. 123-24; Powell, 1991, p. 184).

Recent scholarship has also emphasized how organizations and institutions are structured within an “organizational ecology.” Looking at the wider sphere of organizational ecology allows researchers to understand how individuals and social organizations are interconnected within a dense social web. Interdependent social groups interact with each other to mutually shape the physical and social environment, which in turn impacts the evolution of organizations, organizational forms, and institutionalized practices and norms. Organizations are mutually influenced by a host of social sectors, including nation-states, geographical regions, local governments, other organizations, and micro social groups, like the family and peer networks. Within each sector there are diverse “clusters of norms” and organizational typologies that institutionally define and constrain individual and organizational actors, and thereby, a host of institutional norms and forms are continually reified and perpetuated across a diversely populated social and organizational landscape, which slowly changes through time.

Societies are historically constituted by diverse social sectors and myriad social groups, each with their own institutions, norms, legitimacy, and power. Thus the diverse social structures in any given society can be “potentially contradictory.” These institutional contradictions can allow for social conflict and social change through time as institutions develop in relation with the social and physical environment. However, it is still unclear how institutions “change” and what change actually means. Theorizing the nature and extent of institutional change is an unresolved issue. Institutions are seen as stable social structures outside the control of rational agents which seem to slowly adapt to internal and environmental

conditions through an incremental process, although there is some evidence to suggest that rapid changes can occur in short periods due to environmental shocks.

### **Conclusion: The Importance of History and Philosophy for Public Policy**

In order to make an accurate assessment of future social, educational, and political possibilities, the past institutional environment must be understood in order to contextualize the complexity of the present. But complex understandings of socio-cultural reality rarely inform public policy. Politics is perhaps the central feature of the human condition. Politics is "what everyone inevitably does" (Fish, 1994, p. 19). As Deborah Stone (2002) has argued, the policy making process is about power and "the struggle over ideas," as politicians rhetorically dance through the many political fires of competing interests. Policy makers seek to "control interpretations" by framing, or spinning, present problems under the rhetorical guise of what is legitimate, what is feasible, or what is good. But rarely do policy makers consider the historical complexity of how the past has created the present, and further, the institutional complexity of how social structures determine not only *what is* but also *what is possible*. Nor do policy makers acknowledge their limits as actors: they cannot control the means of the political process, nor can they control the outcomes of enacted policy or legislation. As an early public policy scholar once pointed out about human affairs, "There is, in a word, a little rationality, though not a whole lot" (Wildavsky, 1979, p. 135).

It is important to raise these epistemological issues because much current research in the social sciences, especially in the fields of education, is grounded upon faulty assumptions about human rationality, agency, our capacity for purposive institutional change, and our ability to predict and control the desired outcomes of such change. Faulty epistemological foundations not

only lead to misguided research and erroneous conclusions, but also shape policy discourse, which in turn produces flawed legislation that create unforeseen consequences. Nowhere is this problem more evident than in the financial crisis and Great Recession of 2007-2009. As Philip Mirowski (2010) explained, the "otherwise avoidable tragedies" of the Great Recession could have been foreseen and prevented if it had not been for the "exile of history and philosophy from any place within the contemporary economic orthodoxy" (p. 30). The field of economics was based on "brainwashing, pure and simple, carried out under the banner of rigor," thus, "the sad truth was that they were clueless when it came to the analytical construction of an abstract philosophical argument in isolating just where the flaws in professional practice could be traced and assessing the extent to which they were susceptible to methodological remedies. Mired in banality, the best they could prescribe was more of the same" (p. 31).

But the field of economics is not the only social scientific discipline mired in such epistemological trouble, nor is the Great Recession the only recent crisis that social scientists have failed to forestall or remedy. American institutions of education have been mired down by a host of problems for the past century, but there has been little effective diagnosis, remedy, or hope for future change. I fear the accountability movement will only make things drastically worse instead of better. Educational policy, as with economics, needs to get beyond positivism and rational choice models so as not to keep repeating the cycle of broken-wheel reforms that have been enacted over the past century (Grubb and Lazerson, 1988; Grubb and Lazerson, 2004; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). As Jonathan R. Cole (2009) has recently argued in the context of higher education, "The faculty and students of great universities [and one could add policy makers] typically know very little about their histories, about their structures, or more broadly, about the values that form the foundations of these institutions...the lack of deeper knowledge about the

university and its core values limits their understanding, their range of responses to crises, and even their decisions about the choices they face" (pp. 500-501).

As human beings we live embedded in and constituted by institutions, and our thinking and actions are greatly enabled or constrained by these social structures. As Bellah (1991, p. 5) and his colleagues demonstrated, "We need to understand how much of our lives are lived in and through institutions, and how better institutions are essential if we are to lead better lives." The ultimate effectiveness of any institution of education is enabled or constrained by the social, economic, and political context in which it operates. Policy makers would be better advised to focus on understanding the *process and context* of institutional change, rather than chasing unattainable myths of perfectibility.

We must give up the flawed assumption that we are completely free of social and historical constraints, and that we can rationally understand and control our environments. Instead we must understand the limited possibilities inherent within the human condition and plan accordingly. We have "a little rationality, as Aaron Wildavsky (1979) once said. We must use it wisely to address the tough political choices out of which our social world is built. We must continually ask, "Who will coordinate whom toward what ends?" (Wildavsky, 1979, pp. 131, 148, 309). In this imperfect world of muted vision, corruptible motives, and constrained action we must rely on the flawed tools of human rationality and an irrational sense of hope to choose the best possible course for the future. As a wise man once profoundly declared, "There is no escape: we must decide as we decide; moral risk cannot, at times, be avoided. All we can ask for is that none of the relevant factors be ignored, that the purposes we seek to realize should be seen as elements in a total form of life, which can be enhanced or damaged by decisions" (Berlin, 2000b, p. 15; see also Fish, 1994, p. 20).

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