

## Sociological Institutionalism

**John W. Meyer:** World Society and the Nation-State, in: AJS, Volume 103, Number 1 (July 1997): 144-81, outlined by Nadine

### Classification of approaches

- (1) Microrealist (Waltz): the nation-state is modeled as a rational and highly integrated and functioning (unitary) actor. Inherent needs and interests, as well as power potentials (IV) drive state-action (DV); culture is largely irrelevant (can be used instrumentally).
- (2) Macrorealist (Wallerstein: world system theory): the nation-state (DV) is the result of the worldwide system of economic and political power, exchange and competition (IV).
- (3) Microphenomenological (Almond/Verba, March/Olson): the nation-state (DV) is the product of national cultural and interpretative systems (IV).
- (4) Macrophenomenological (Meyer, Thomas, and Powell: sociological institutionalism): the nation-state (at large social reality at the world level) (DV) is a culturally and exogenously constructed (IV) entity. Culture is substantially organized on a worldwide basis.

Hypothesis: Many features of the contemporary nation-state derive from worldwide models constructed and propagated through global cultural and associational processes.

Explanation: global cultural models (IV) define and legitimate, therefore shape the structures and policies of national-states (DV). There is a considerable worldwide consensus on the nature and value of constructs like the nation-state, citizenship, human rights, education, socio-economic development, and rationalized justice. Those models have developed universal authority and legitimacy. To be recognized as a member of the international system and international and world society, a state has to attempt to live up to these concepts. The global cultural models explain (and predict further) cross-national isomorphism despite enormous differences in resources, tradition and history and are adopted even if they are not “functional” to the local environs.

### Characteristic traits of the contemporary nation-state:

- I Isomorphism and isomorphic change: world societal discourse constructs socially valuable features of the nation state and its domestic institutions.
- II Rational Actorhood: nation-states try to live up to the model of rational unitary and responsible actors; national interests are defined in terms of individual rights and socio-economic progress.
- III Decoupling: of policy goals and political practice. The worldwide models (ideals) of the nation-state and its domestic functions decouple from the implementation capabilities of a state and/or from the local needs and requirements of political and economic organization.
- IV Expansive Structuration: spread and expansion of rationalized, differentiated public and private organizational forms to fulfill the requirements of rational actorhood. Expansive structuration is often decoupled for example from the organizational needs in developing countries.

Worldwide processes that produce or reconstruct nation-state actors

I The construction of Nation-State Identity and purpose:

Worldwide models of sovereign identity define the socially accepted structures and policies of a nation-state. To be externally recognized and internally legitimated nation-state actors attempt to live up to these models.

II The systemic maintenance of nation-state actor identity:

External pressure through authoritative world organizations with “scientific expertise and professionalized ideologies keep the nation-state actors on the path of “rational actorhood and responsibility”.

III The legitimation of subnational actors and practices:

World-society organized in professional and scientific organizations and world-cultural models have direct effects on the creation and sustenance of domestic actors. Through external legitimation by international organizations, domestic actors are supported in their effort to realize the worldwide recognized models, norms and principles.

Diffusion of world cultural models through organizational elements of world society

“Rationalized others” (p. 162): scientific and professional associations, epistemic communities (science, education, economy, economic development, human rights, technology, medicine), governmental and nongovernmental organizations. As a result of a worldwide discourse, “rationalized others” (legitimacy and authority through scientific or universalistic knowledge of a relatively unified culture of natural and moral law) establish general principles of progress and justice in all aspects of social daily life. They also promote the establishment of subnational organizational processes (=increasing structuration). The United Nations System and its assembly form an organizational center and provide a forum for public discussion. Nation-states also are inclined to copy “successful models” of “modern actorhood” from each other.

Empiric validation of the theory

Correlations among longitudinal variables like world totals/year for economic production, energy consumption, foundings of governmental and nongovernmental organization, education enrollments, urban population, trade... (p. 167) are considered as indicators for modernization and rationalization processes. The purpose is not to find out causal relations but to find out consistent correlation among these variables.

Dynamism and change

The inherent contradictions of, and tradeoffs in world cultural models and goods like equality versus liberty, progress versus justice, standardization versus diversity, efficiency versus individuality generate conflict and dynamic change.