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The Instrumentality of Ceremonial Habits of Thought

Abstract: This article problematizes the Veblenian Dichotomy, highlighting the instrumental aspects of ceremonial habits of thought. The Veblenian Dichotomy has become a key tool of analysis among institutionalist economists, but devolves into a dualism, when used to define progress. This is evident in the identification of progress with increasing instrumental value, implying ceremonial institutions are antithetical to progress. This led to a debate among Institutionalists in the 1980 and 1990s, between those following in the tradition of Clarence Ayres, identifying progress with a universal social value principle, and those asserting ceremonial institutions as more than “imbecile”: the Wendell Gordon-Anne Mayhew camp. This debate never reached a conclusion, yet a large literature emerged animated by the ideas stemming from the former group, with little work expanding on the arguments of the latter. This article reopens these debates, building off of the arguments of the Gordon-Mayhew side. It is asserted that using the dichotomy in defining progress turns it into a dualism antithetical to evolutionary analysis. Furthermore, it inhibits our ability to complexly analyze ceremonial habits of thought, not allowing us to recognize their inherently instrumental aspects. This problematizes the dichotomy itself. In light of these arguments, the role of the academic as myth debunker is asserted as a way forward.

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Behavior norms should not be condemned to the outer darkness because they are eternally more or less obsolescent. Behavior norms are necessary if we are to have some degree of order and predictability in society instead of chaos...It is not useful categorically to stigmatize all institutions and their associated behavior norms as merely ceremonial, imbecile, useless, and bad, and to conclude that they should be abolished.

(Gordon 1984, 370)

Introduction: A Brief Overview of the Debate

The Veblenian dichotomy has become a main tool of analysis among original institutionalist. Its inspiration comes from the work of Thorstein Veblen¹, and is articulated explicitly by Clarence Ayres, in, *The Theory of Economic Progress*. Ayres posited the dichotomy as institutions on one side and technology on the other, the former containing the conservative elements of society, and the latter the dynamic. Recognizing that institutions can contain both dynamic and static

¹ Geoffrey M. Hodgson (1998) refutes the idea that the dichotomy is to be found in Veblen, highlighting that the dichotomy may have been inspired by Veblen, but is unique to Ayres, developed through a novel synthesis of the work of Veblen and Dewey.

elements led J. Fagg Foster to redefine the dichotomy as instrumental-ceremonial (Waller 1982, 764).

The dichotomy first posited by Ayres was more than just an analytical distinction to be deployed in the process of inquiry, but a value principle by which to evaluate and choose alternative policies for society. For Ayres, the goal was to overcome and minimize those static elements of society, allowing technology to guide the way. The dichotomy as value principle was again refined by those working in the Ayresian tradition, animating Foster's theory of institutional adjustment², further developed by Marc Tool explicating the instrumental value principle³. This was further refined and implemented by Paul Dale Bush developing the concept of ceremonial encapsulation, whereby new instrumental advancements can be captured by ceremonial forces and directed toward invidious ends (Bush 1987, 1989). This all culminates in many institutionalists defining progressive institutional change as Tool did: change that facilitates, "...the continuity of human life and the noninvidious re-creation of community through the instrumental use of knowledge" (1979, 293).

The axiological commitment to increasing instrumental value in society, tacitly implied that ceremonial institutions are merely in the way of progress, "imbecile", there to be eradicated or eschewed in an effort to minimize ceremonial encapsulation. This strong stance led another group of Institutionalists to push back, led by Wendell Gordon and Anne Mayhew (See: Gordon 1984,1990; Mayhew 1987, 1990, 2010; Neale 1987, 1990, 1991; Swaney 1986 and later Waller 2022), highlighting the implicit attack on culture, and the inconsistencies of a universal value criterion with an evolutionary approach.

This debate took place, primarily, during the 1980s and 1990s⁴. The proceeding trajectory of the academic literature has built on the Ayresian camp insofar as a large number of articles, animated by the refined dichotomy and concerned with applying the principles of institutional adjustment to increase instrumental value in society, have far outweighed those articles explicitly dealing with culture and/or animated by the arguments of the Gordon-Mayhew camp.

These debates never reached an adequate conclusion, yet the literature has moved on in a path-dependent character building on one camp without explicitly dealing with the critiques, let alone building on the other camp. A revisitation of these issues is required. The notion of culture is the foundation of the original institutionalist approach to economics and by not seriously considering that side of the earlier debate, one of the pillars of Original Institutional analysis is eroding. This erosion is the result of an internalization of an earlier formed conceptual apparatus and the biases embedded, which undermine our ability to comprehensively deal with culture and ceremonial habits of thought and behaviors as something more than "imbecile".

² The theory of institutional adjustment is most explicitly stated in Foster 1981.

³ This is fully developed in Marc Tool 1979.

⁴ For arguments critiquing the instrumental social value principle, see: Gordon 1984,1990; Mayhew 1987, 1990, 2010; Neale 1987, 1990, 1991; Swaney 1986; and later Waller 2022. The primary responses to these arguments are to be found in Tool 1990a, 1990b, and Ranson 1991.

This article seeks to disrupt this path-dependency, highlighting problems embedded in the Veblenian Dichotomy, specifically when it is used to animate the instrumental social value principle. The concerns of Mayhew (1987) and Waller (2022) are echoed and refined, specifically identifying the locus of the issue: moving the dichotomy from an analytical distinction to a value principle ontologizes a dualism antithetical to an evolutionary approach. The article then moves beyond these points, making its fullest contribution, highlighting the instrumentality of ceremonial habits of thought. The paper will wrap up discussing how we move forward in light of these arguments, specifically addressing the role of the academic in society, one of the implicit strands of arguments throughout the earlier debate.

Importance of a Conceptual Apparatus

Now many of us are familiar with extensive interrogations of our own conceptual apparatus as evidenced by the long list of articles dealing with what is the definition of an institution, technology, etc. But this is important, if our biases are to lie anywhere it is embedded into our conceptual apparatus. This point led Weber ([1922] 2013) to painstakingly lay out his conceptual apparatus, and later write a methodological piece explaining how only by interrogating our own conceptual apparatuses and biases are we to have any chance of achieving “objectivity” (Weber 1949). This process of interrogating one’s own conceptual apparatus and biases was termed reflexivity by Pierre Bourdieu, who echoed the sentiments of Weber (Bourdieu and Waquant 1992, 235-248). Veblen (1901) even recognized potential limitations imposed by a conceptual apparatus, interrogating the limitations of a neoclassical conceptual apparatus (land, labor, and capital), highlighting its blinding nature to other trends in society. This article is animated by these sentiments and a reflexive approach.

From Analytical Distinction to Value Principle

The dichotomy itself, specifically as formulated by Foster, is not a problem when used as an analytical distinction, nor is the notion of instrumental valuing as an ever present aspect of human behavior. In other words, when the dichotomy is used as a heuristic to organize the complexity of our world, it is an analytical distinction (separating aspects of society in analysis while recognizing their inherently related and inseparable nature in reality), which is functional. Furthermore, those challenging the Ayresian camp recognize that the instrumental valuation process as a universal human behavior, a daily problem-solving process, distinct from a social value principle used by academics as a criterion of what is progressive. The issue arises when the analytical distinction becomes a dualism, and when a universal aspect of human behavior becomes turned into a universal criterion defining progress.

Ayres, early in *The Theory of Economic Progress* laid out the dichotomy as an analytical distinction, stating:

The business of “getting a living” includes both these functions. That is, it includes activities of a technological character, and it also includes activities of a ceremonial character; and these two sets of activities not only coexist but condition each other at every point and between them define and constitute the total activity of “getting a living”. It is the problem of economic analysis to

distinguish and understand these factors, and their mutual relations, and configurations of economic activity for which they are responsible. (1944, 99)

In the quote above, there is no issue, recognizing the dialectical relationship of both sides of the dichotomy co-animating reality. The problem arises when the dichotomy becomes methodological. This is one of the main points by Waller (2022) arguing that as a heuristic the dichotomy has use value, however, problems arise when the dichotomy becomes methodological. However, Waller never explicitly states when this occurs in Ayres or what is meant by “methodological”.

The point when the dichotomy turns “methodological” is when it is morphed into a value principle, whereby progress is identified with increasing instrumentality and decreasing ceremonial habits of thought and behavior⁵. More explicitly, when turned into a value principle the dichotomy becomes *ontologized*⁶ as a dualism, implying the separation of instrumental and ceremonial habits of thoughts and behavior is possible, whereby we can increase one and decrease the other: failing to recognize their intertwined nature. Dualisms are antithetical to evolutionary analysis and rejection of dualisms is one of the pillars of Radical Institutionalism (Waller 1990).

Mayhew also identifies the issue when moving from recognizing the instrumental valuation process as a universal form of human behavior to a universal criterion upon which progress can be defined (1987, 597). Mayhew labels this problem a fallacy of composition (1987, 587). Mayhew does correctly identify the problem as arising when transformed into the social value principle, but does not explicitly recognize the true issue lies in the ontologizing of a dualism. However, this is implicit in her argument, identifying that to posit progress as an increase in instrumentality with a simultaneous decrease in ceremonial aspects of institutions leads to a “subtle attack” on culture (Mayhew 1987, 587). She then goes on to highlight the larger problem stating:

The danger is that when cultures come to be seen as either the consequence of rational or reasonable processes, or simply, as imbecile leftovers, they lose much of their importance in explaining human behavior and *we revert to a dangerous ethnocentrism*. Adoption of an elemental human strategy can *transform specific cultural patterns into ‘mere constraints’ or into irrelevancies: and we then lose our ability to grasp, even dimly, how bound we are by our own cultural patterns*. (Mayhew 1987, 602 my emphasis)

Ultimately, Mayhew is pointing to the dangers of seeing one aspect of culture as detrimental to progress and the other as the very definition of progress. Taken to its logical extent, if we were only able to remove all ceremonial behavior and replace it with instrumental the problems of society would be solved. Which again is antithetical to an evolutionary and pragmatic understanding of problems: “today’s solution is tomorrow’s problem” (Waller 1990, 901).

⁵ Tool makes this goal explicit stating, “The continuing and central task in social and economic change of the institutional fabric is one of *increasing* the degree and magnitude of *instrumental* performance and *decreasing* the degree and magnitude of *invidious* performance” (1979, 167 original emphasis).

⁶ This is what I believe Waller meant when he said “methodological”.

This issue, the time and spatially invariant character of the instrumental value principle, was highlighted by Gordon (1984, 1990) and Mayhew (1987), however, Tool (1990a, 1990b) pushed back on this characterization. Tool argued, “[the instrumental social value principle] is a *continuously* relevant principle with which it assesses other value concepts in considering proposed solutions to social and economic problems. But it has no ‘eternal verity’ standing” (1990a, 1112). What Tool is arguing here is that an instrumental value criterion is continuously relevant, but is not to be characterize as time invariant. This seems to be a contradictory claim, however, Tool recognized elsewhere that what is instrumental at one point in time may not be in the future (1990b, 1129). Yet he does argue that the instrumental value principle is “pan-cultural” (1990b, 1124). Therefore, it seems, for Tool it is not time invariant, but spatially invariant. Baldwin Ranson, agrees with Tool identifying the instrumental value criterion as “trans-cultural” but goes farther than Tool, in response to criticism stating, “there is a universal criterion for distinguishing better from worse judgements” (1990, 1145).

It is ultimately unclear the position of those in the Ayresian camp, as in certain places they point out that it is not universal, at least not time invariant, but then at other points assert it as “universal criterion” of judgement. Part of this may be miscommunication due to the fallacy of composition, however, its operationalization in defining progress seems to point to an invariance of some form embedded within the instrumental social value principle, an invariance antithetical to an evolutionary approach to science as defined by Veblen (1898). If what they are arguing is that instrumental valuing, animating human behavior, is universal and time invariant then we agree. However, if they are arguing that the definition of progress, put forth by Tool (1979), is transcultural and continuously relevant, there is no agreement as the definition of progress is always culturally specific.

In sum, this section echoes the arguments of Waller (2022) and Mayhew (1987) but refines these arguments by identifying the locus of the problem, whereby the dichotomy becomes ontologized as a dualism through its transformation into a social value principle. The dangers of a universal criterion of judgement and the embedded ethnocentrism are also echoed and highlighted. More work/clarity is needed to interrogate the consistency of a universal value principle with an evolutionary understanding of society.

The Ceremonial as Instrumental

This dualistic approach embedded into the evolution of the dichotomy has mitigated our ability to deal with ceremonial institutions as something more than “imbecile”. It has not allowed us to recognize that even ceremonial habits of thought themselves play an instrumental role. The idea of instrumental aspects to ceremonial habits of thought is not entirely new and has been eluded to in the originalist institutionalist literature: James Swaney highlighted how some ceremonial behaviors⁷ may result in protecting the ecosystem (1986, 398) and Bush also recognized this when discussing the Trobriander’s Canoe building practices, specifically highlighting the legitimating role of ceremonial habits of thought, ensuring continuity to the practice which was instrumental (1987, 1085). However, this notion of ceremonial habits of thought playing an instrumental role in the provisioning process has not been taken up extensively within the Original Institutional Literature. The anthropological and sociological

⁷ Though he did not identify them.

literature has, though not in Original Institutionalist terms. Anthropological and sociological literature will be used to elucidate the instrumental aspects of ceremonial behavior.

One of the founders of modern anthropology and sociology, Emile Durkheim, recognized the instrumentality of ceremonial institutions in the provisioning process. Durkheim ([1912] 1995) argued that religion plays an instrumental role insofar as it binds people into groups, necessary to provision, as we are group creatures. Sigmund Freud (1927) also recognized the instrumentality of religion, given its ability to restrain those inherent violent and sexual tendencies, posited to humans by Freud, which was necessary to facilitate group living and thus group provisioning.

More broadly, Claude Lévi-Strauss, argued that it is a time invariant aspect of human nature to create myth structures (ceremonial habits of thought) to rationalize the arbitrariness of our world. Lévi-Strauss argues myth (ceremonial reasoning) and science (instrumental reasoning) are different in kind but similar in function, both ordering the constellation of phenomena we experience each day (1966, 13). In mitigating the tyranny of arbitrariness, anxiety is quelled and action, necessary for provisioning, is facilitated. In other words, these habits of thought, both ceremonial and instrumental form a constellation of beliefs which provide us with a level of *ontological security*⁸ needed to undertake action. Not only is this a tendency of individuals but society at large, highlighting this point Bourdieu states, “Every established order tends to produce (to very different degrees and with very different means) the naturalization of its own arbitrariness” (1977, 164).

These arguments were the grounds upon which, Clifford Geertz calls, “Strain Theory” was developed; an approach to ideology, which recognizes the inherently function role of ideology, mitigating anxiety and facilitating action. This is contrasted with an “Interest Theory” of ideology, which focuses solely on its role in developing, maintaining, and reifying power hierarchies (Geertz [1973] 2000, 219). The Original Institutionalist literature tends to approach ideology more through the latter than the former, which is understandable given the how the deployment of the dichotomy as often led to an undermining of our ability to comprehensively analyze and understand ceremonial habits of thought. Ultimately, this is a false dualism and to understand ideology, power, and society more broadly, one must embrace the insights of both⁹: rejecting dualism.

Powell (forthcoming) also highlights the role with which ceremonial habits of thought play in legitimizing our reality, which once recognized, can be co-opted to facilitating staying power to policies demeaned progressive. Thus, ceremonial encapsulation of institutional change can be an advantage, given its ability to legitimate and thus create continuity. The need for continuity in change is embedded in Foster’s minimal dislocation principle with regards to

⁸ This term comes from Anthony Giddens’ (1990) text, *The Consequences of Modernity*, developed to describe how, in modernity, habits of thought are formed to maintain a level of ontological and psychological security necessary for undertaking action.

⁹ Bourdieu highlights this as one of the central tensions animating power structures in society, stating, “Resistance can be alienating and submission can be liberating” (Bourdieu and Waquant 1992, 24).

institutional adjustment. More generally the instrumentality of ceremonial institutions creating order, stability, and continuity are highlighted by Gordon in the epigraph of this article.

Now one may argue what is described above are instrumental aspects of ceremonial institutions, implying they are still differentiable; however, what makes these ceremonial habits of thought instrumental is precisely because they are grounded in ceremonial habits of thoughts: myths. Again, science is similar in function to myth in ordering the constellation of phenomena we experience each day, which also mitigates anxiety and facilitates action. However, science cannot fully replace myth. Only myth, given its simplicity in ordering a multitude of phenomena simultaneously, often with a relatively simple narrative making it accessible to all humans, can mitigate the tyranny of arbitrariness necessary for provisioning within the bounds of our cognitive constraints. Scientific, causal, instrumental ordering of phenomena is often based on complex reasoning and some explicit recognition of arbitrariness, it is not within humans' cognitive capacity to use only instrumental reasoning to order the constellation of phenomena we experience.

Ayres himself recognized this, to a point, arguing:

Within the limits of current process, it is true that mankind needs superstition and coercion. This fact is often cited as the climatic nullification of the "illusion" of progress. But such an interpretation is an expression of the metaphysical misconception of the idea of progress. To whatever degree superstition and institutionalized status may prevail at any given time, the habituation of the race to those forms of behavior does not constitute a need, just as a cripple needs a crutch, But the fact that a person is habituated to the use of crutches does not establish that crutches are good in themselves or that attainment of crutch-less health is a fatuous illusion. Needs conceived in weakness are not a sound criterion of possible achievement, for individuals or for societies. (1944, 247)

The problem with Ayres' interpretation (aside from its ableist overtones) is that he sees this need as a defect of humans, something to be corrected or "cured", rather than recognizing it as an innately human trait. To have disdain for such a trait is the equivalent to a disdain for humanity. Recognizing this innately human trait is not a rejection of the possibility of progress, but rather a recognition of the constraints by which progress must proceed within.

So how do we move forward, a post-modern quagmire of relativism? Unequivocally no. As Geertz once highlighted, to argue against universal principles does not inherently identify the proponent of these critiques with the opposite view of some pure moral relativism (1984). Rather we must recognize the biases embedded in our tools as we are currently deploying them, animating a universal value criterion, and try to disabuse them of these biases returning them to their original use as a heuristic, an analytical distinction to help us order the multitude of phenomena we as academics deal with, while still recognizing their interrelated dialectical relationship in reality.

In considering change we approach it as Freud did in, *The Future of an Illusion*, whereby Freud recognized the instrumentality of religion, identified it as too repressive and asked if an alternative could be formed which was less repressive while maintaining the instrumentality religion was currently providing. Only a non-dualistic approach to the dichotomy will allow us to recognize the instrumentality of ceremonial habits of thought and thus allow us to consider how they can be co-opted in change and/or how we can facilitate change while maintaining the instrumental aspects of ceremonial habits of thought. This could mean replacing ceremonial behaviors with instrumental, but it could also mean replacing ceremonial behaviors with other ceremonial behaviors, just argued to be less repressive, but that is for the group to decide.

Moving Forward: The Role of the Academic

These debates, which are the motivation of this paper, began in 1984 with Wendell Gordon describing the role of Institutional economics. For him the goal was focusing on and understanding process rather than theorizing optimal outcomes (1984, 396). The Ayresian camp argues the goal is to pursue inquiry, an inherently value laden endeavor, with the instrumental value principle to guide; however, not only can it direct inquiry, it puts the institutional economist in a position to discern better from worse policies. The former part of this proposition finds no dissenters from either camp, it is the latter part of this proposition where issue lies. Approaching the role of the academic as capable of discerning better from worse outcomes, puts them closer to the position of technocrat than academic. To be fair, Tool does state explicitly that it is not for the academic to “prescribe oughts for society” and that change, “must be self-imposed” (1990b, 1127). However, defining progress, as Tool does, is defining an “ought” for society. This is not our charge.

Rather, in understanding and describing process, our role is to debunk and destroy myths. By debunking and destroying myths we generate doubt restrained by those myths. In generating doubt, we set off the instrumental value process John Dewey described. As that process unfolds, people deal with their doubt through inquiry, hopefully animated by instrumental reasoning. Each person gets a vote in the way forward, including ourselves. What is progressive will be defined through the instrumental valuation process undertaken by each in response to the doubt raised in a specific time and within a specific culture.

The notion that the role of the academic is to undo myth is not new to the Institutionalists¹⁰. In many ways this was Veblen’s goal, to see society through a lens which others could not, highlighting the absurdity of our behavior with the goal of generating discourse about a way forward. Mary V. Wrenn (2022) discusses this extensively as a pillar of original institutionalist analysis, and her work stands as a modern example of this approach to social sciences (e.g., Wrenn 2016). Tool often argued that Veblen was hindered by his lack of a social value principle, but Veblen was not hindered nor seeking a social value principle, he was playing

¹⁰ Nor is it new to those working in the sociological tradition. Norbert Elias posited, “The sociologist as destroyer of myth” (1978, 50). Pierre Bourdieu echoed these statements, arguing, “the business of the sociologist is to denaturalize and to defatalize the social world, that is, to destroy the myths that cloak the exercise of power and the perpetuation of domination” (1992, 50).

his role as a social scientist: destroying myths; destroying myths to generate doubt, which triggers the instrumental valuation process, an ability all humans have and exercise.

Conclusion

This article problematizes the Veblenian Dichotomy, specifically its use in animating the instrumental social value principle utilized by many institutionalists to define what is progressive institutional change. By identifying progress with increasing instrumental behaviors and decreasing ceremonial behaviors a dualism is formed, which is antithetical to an evolutionary approach. In forming this dualism, ceremonial aspects of society are downgraded in the analysis, being reduced to imbecile aspects of institutions to be overcome. This downgrading mitigates our ability to recognize the role ceremonial institutions play in society, specifically their instrumental role. By recognizing the instrumentality of ceremonial habits of thought, not only is the dualism implicit in the institutional adjustment literature shown to be false, but the use-value of the dichotomy itself is challenged. In light of these arguments the role of the academic is revisited, arguing we are not technocrats, nor should we act as such, but rather focus on debunking societal myths. In doing so the main factor inhibiting doubt to form, the starting point of any instrumental valuation process, is removed and the instrumental valuation process itself is allowed to take place by those in society, including ourselves. The path forward will hopefully be decided through democratic debate informed by the instrumental valuation process.

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