

Thinking Seriously about Institutions

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On Thinking Institutionally by Hugh Heclo
(Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2008)

Hugh Heclo's superbly crafted new book promotes what he admits to be an unfashionable idea: the institution. The past half-century has been most unkind to those discrete cohering entities, both formal and informal, that "represent inheritances of valued purpose with attendant rules and moral obligations." Today, Americans almost universally denigrate institutions, including those of which they are members. Whether it is marriage, Congress, Rotary clubs, lawyering, or chivalry, the institution is under siege.

The reasons are numerous. Heclo provides a litany of malfeasance within presidential administrations and Congress since the late 1950s. Although the rest of American history is hardly devoid of similar episodes, he argues that mass communications and our interconnectedness exacerbate the public impact of such events and, having been spun by corporations and politicians for the last seventy-five years, we are innately skeptical of the *mea culpas* and attempts to account for failure that inevitably follow. Cumulatively, these kinds of things help explain the "performance-based" source of our pervasive distrust of institutions.

Attacks on institutions are "culture-based" too. They come from our hyper-democratic politics that do not respect any

kind of differentiated social role. They stem from the Enlightenment with its obsessive focus on the self, its unshakeable confidence in human reason, and its belief that an institution has no value beyond that which an individual can squeeze from it for personal gain. They have roots in our education system that has designated institutions as, at best, annoying encumbrances and, at worst, oppressive tools of the past. Students are taught to believe what they like and express themselves as they see fit. Even people understood to be conservatives—at least in the way we conceptualize political ideology today—assail institutions. Free-market economics places a premium on self-interest and assumes institutions stifle innovation and entrepreneurship. Indeed, one of the most interesting implications of Heclo's book is a somewhat novel understanding of the principal cleavage in today's conservative movement. It is the esteem in which its adherents hold institutions that can be used to distinguish them from one another.

Despite today's inhospitable environment, institutions are indubitably worth supporting. They provide reference points in an uncertain world. They tie us to the past and present and oblige us to think about others. They furnish personal assistance and institutionalize trust. They give our lives purpose and, therefore, the kind of self-satisfaction that only the wholesale rejection of them is supposed to provide.

How do we protect and promote them? Heclo says that first and foremost we must

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learn to think institutionally. This is very different from thinking about institutions as scholars do. It is not an objective and intellectual exercise. It is a more participatory and intuitive one. What is more, it is not quixotic. To think institutionally you do not have to live slavishly by an institution's rules, become an institution's chief supporter, or heroically buffer an institution from the vicissitudes of the outside world. Instead, thinking this way means something less, perhaps something easier. You should "distrust but value." To think institutionally you need a "particular sensitivity" to or an "appreciative viewpoint" of institutions. To be more specific, the exercise moves our focus away from the self and towards a recognition of our debts and obligations to others.

Hecló writes with particular reverence about many of the Founders of this country when fleshing out the idea of thinking institutionally. He provides an interesting analysis of Thomas Jefferson's and James Madison's thoughts on usufruct, for example. Whereas Jefferson believed strongly that neither those who lived in the past nor those who will live in the future can bind the decisions of a community's current inhabitants, Madison addressed the issue of generational independence using institutional thinking. To him, past, present, and future are woven into the same fabric.

Hecló also rejects arguments made by scholars like Charles Beard who believed the Framers of the Constitution wrote the document to advance their own economic interests. Instead, he asserts, they were acutely aware of the assistance they had been provided by those who had pushed for liberty before them—especially those Greeks, Frenchmen, and Englishmen who forged the canonical thought about freedom. They knew that what they were doing would influence tremendously the lives of millions of people who would be

born well after their deaths. They understood their actions would influence millions of their contemporaries across the Western world. In other words, there was a vibrant sense among the Framers that their actions had significant implications beyond the time and space they occupied.

Hecló is highly critical of rational-choice theory's understanding of institutional foundation and development. This school of thought—believed by many to be regnant in the social sciences—views institutions as the product of the interests of a few of the powerful or a majority of the weak. Institutions are adapted because they no longer maximize these interests in the current state of the world. Rational choice, therefore, clearly undercuts institutional thinking and the normative ramifications that come with it. But it is more problematic than that. As a matter of theory, Hecló sees it as too reductionist. As an empirical matter he views it as frequently just plain wrong.

Moreover, rational-choice theory has always been presented with the conundrum of institutional service. Why do institutions survive when all of their members are self-interested? Why would someone join an institution when its interests will often be at odds with his own? Why would an individual powerful enough to establish an institution permit it to serve the interests of others? The stock answers have been that institutional membership and particularly leadership are incentivized. Seniors join AARP not for the purposes of fellowship and participating in public debates about Social Security and Medicare policy but for the insurance, pharmacy, and other subsidies and benefits members enjoy. Professors' academic careers must essentially be suspended when they assume the administrative tasks that a department needs to have performed if it is to survive. In return, they are paid more than their colleagues of similar rank and ability. The Speaker of the

House of Representatives and the chairs of the body's committees are better positioned to raise campaign money, run for higher office, and get their bills through the legislative process. This is payoff for serving the institution and protecting its powers and prerogatives from competitors. To think institutionally, then, is to do something much more than provide individuals with incentives to be part of and promote institutions. It calls on them to modify their behavior. In this way, Hecló challenges rational choice's assumptions about institutional maintenance vigorously.

The second way institutions are supported is by acting institutionally. One can only act institutionally if one first thinks institutionally. Hecló argues that acting institutionally has three components. The first, "profession," involves learning and respecting a body of knowledge and aspiring to a particular level of conduct. The second, "office," is a sense of duty that compels an individual to accomplish considerably more for the institution than a minimal check-list of tasks enumerated within a kind of job description. Finally, there is "stewardship." Here Hecló is getting at the notion of fiduciary responsibility. The individual essentially takes the decisions of past members on trust, acts in the interests of present and future members, and stands accountable for his actions.

Hecló is not particularly optimistic that we will change and begin thinking institutionally in a systematic way. Thinking institutionally is a lonely pursuit. Its prac-

tioners are unappreciated and considered naive. They expect to be taken advantage of by those who care nothing for institutions, only for themselves. But that does not mean we should not do it. Hecló makes it very clear. A world where more people think and act institutionally would be a much better place.

On the day I finished reading this book, the *New York Times* published an article about Wootton Bassett in southern England. The village is on the road from the Royal Air Force base in Lyneham to a morgue in Oxford. Every now and then, hearses drive down its High Street carrying the bodies of British soldiers killed in action in Iraq and Afghanistan. In a spontaneous but conscientious manner, villagers and the local chapter of the Royal British Legion have taken to informing the community about the date and time of these repatriations—the official term for the return of these servicemen to the United Kingdom. Hundreds of people then drop what they are doing and stand along the road, in complete stillness and silence, as the coffins go by. Participants say they are there to express their gratitude to their fellow citizens and reflect upon the sacrifice made by members of the armed services. They do not want any attention. According to the *Times* reporter, they believe they are behaving as any decent person would. In Hugh Hecló's words, they are thinking, and acting, institutionally.