

# Anthropology and the New Institutionalism

by

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In this piece I present the results of a small systematic review of recent articles in the top four anthropology journals that relate to new institutionalism. This review captures the major currents of anthropological research related to rational choice theory, collective action, methodological individualism, group selection, and new institutionalism proper. One of the surprising findings from this survey is the extent to which archaeologists and bio-cultural anthropologists are currently making important contributions to these issues, and the relative dearth of contributions from socio-cultural anthropologists. I speculate about the underlying reasons for this, including the recent dominance of post-modernism, and the grip that competing perspectives have had in the field. I remain optimistic that anthropologists will in future become better connected to the institutional literature and suggest accessible readings for anthropologists who wish to do so.

## *1. Introduction*

New institutionalism is the study of how institutions affect the behavior of individuals and how individual behavior affects the evolution of institutions; pivotal to these relations is the role of incentives. Anthropology is the last of the social sciences to take notice of the current interest in institutionalism. And this is sad, because social anthropologists arguably have more to offer than any other group by way of diverse empirical case studies that are essential to the fleshing out of issues relevant to a theory of institutions. Those in the other social sciences who are trying to make sense of this theoretical terrain clearly need the raw material and theoretical insights of anthropologists. But all is not lost. While there are very few social anthropologists who read and write for a new institutional audience, there are other types of anthropologists who have familiarity with related issues such as rational choice, collective action, and methodological individualism. Many of these scholars have published recent work that will be of interest to new institutionalists. Anthropology is blessed with the insights of a “four fields” approach: socio-cultural anthropology,

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\* The author wishes to thank Jack Knight for his comments on a draft of this paper.

archaeology, physical anthropology, and linguistic anthropology. The advantage of this breadth for those interested in institutional analysis is that the archaeological and bio-cultural literatures, especially, tend to take an evolutionary perspective that offers extremely valuable insights for a theory of institutions. In this short essay I attempt to capture the main currents of recent anthropological research that should be of interest to institutionalists. I close with some suggestions for how anthropologists could help make their work more accessible to other social scientists interested in institutions.

Neither space nor time allow a comprehensive review of everything in anthropology that might be of relevance to new institutionalists and worthy of bringing to the attention of readers in other disciplines. As a compromise, I set myself the task of surveying a fixed sample of work in anthropology, in the hope of capturing the tip of the iceberg, as it were. This "formal" approach to sampling the discipline does have the advantage of giving one a feel for the main currents of research in anthropology. The general paucity of socio-cultural research directly germane to institutionalism also forced me to think more broadly about the relevance of recent research in archaeology and bio-cultural anthropology. Although very few of these pieces relate their case studies or theory to a new institutional audience, they offer tremendous insights for those interested in working out a realistic theory of institutions.

The sample I surveyed for the purposes of this article includes what I am fairly confident most anthropologists would agree to be the top four journals in anthropology that publish socio-cultural anthropology. These include the flagship journal of the discipline's national association - the *American Anthropologist* (AA), *Current Anthropology* (CA), the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (now JRAI, formerly *Man*), and the *American Ethnologist* (AE).<sup>1</sup> Of these journals, only the last publishes no archaeology or physical anthropology, though JRAI publishes decidedly less than the AA and CA. For the purposes of this survey I reviewed all articles published in the years 1995, 1996, 1997, and 1998 to the present (June, 1998). Having included three and a half year's of scholarship in the top journals in the field I suspect that most of the current debates in socio-cultural anthropology are represented, though obviously not all of the relevant discussion of each issue.

It probably is a surprise to no one that post-modernism has been prominent in these journals over recent years, though considerably more so in the AA and the AE than in either CA or the JRAI. There is no consensus definition of post-modernism, but it is clearly associated with a movement away from scientific approaches to the study of human culture and society. It is generally associated with a more literary, hermeneutic emphasis giving as much attention

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<sup>1</sup> In the interests of full disclosure I should note that two of these journals (the AA and CA) are housed at my university, though the AA has only just arrived and none of the issues covered in this survey were under the editorship of the new editor, whose first volume appears in September, 1998.

to the attributes and suspected biases of the observer as it does to the observed. In its most extreme form all manner of empirical observation is suspect because objectivity is deemed impossible.

Considerable controversy surrounded the just ended editorship of the AA when they began a decidedly post-modern turn five years ago.<sup>2</sup> Under the editorship of a physical anthropologist beginning with the September 1998 issue it is expected that the nature of the socio-cultural anthropology published in the future will be of considerably more interest to this audience, though few pieces published during the span of this survey were relevant to this discussion. Both the British JRAI and the AE have more humanist bents than either CA or what is likely to be the case for the forthcoming issues of the AA, but both have continued to publish empirical case studies. CA clearly stands out as the journal publishing the most interesting work for the audience of this paper.

One sign that the post-modern movement may be on the wane is the recent group of articles in the top journals defending science, and this is the first set of papers I review below. In a similar vein, there have been a number of discussions of rationality and individual actor approaches. Getting even closer to the subject matter of the new institutionalists, a number of bio-cultural anthropologists, especially those involved in the study of hunting and gathering societies, have been debating the collective action problem, the nature of sharing and fairness in small-scale societies, and its implications for human evolution. Interest in cultural group selection, or the failure of institutional structures to sustain the group, has also risen in recent years. Finally, I conclude this survey with a discussion of the socio-cultural literature that speaks directly to and from a new institutional perspective. Here and there I include a few notable pieces outside the parameters of this time-limited survey of four journals, but likely to be of interest to this audience.

## 2. *Science Versus Post-Modernism*

Although not directly germane to the issue at hand, a number of recent articles for and against science in anthropological thought dramatize the gap between those who might be inclined to pursue new institutionalism from a more formal or rigorous perspective and those who consider such endeavors misguided and worse.<sup>3</sup> Arguably, one of the central turning points in the science-versus-post-modernism "wars" was launched by REYNA [1994] in the JRAI, just before the period covered in this survey, but cited frequently in the four journals in the years since. In his impressive attack on post-modernism and literary approach-

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<sup>2</sup> This controversy was aired quite publicly in the issues of the *American Anthropology Newsletter* during the last five years.

<sup>3</sup> Those interested in this debate will also find a lively exchange on this topic in issues of the *American Anthropology Newsletter*.

es in anthropology, the author even takes on Geertz's "thick description," thus taking no prisoners. Reyna stands up for objectivity and validity in anthropological research, thus attacking back on one of the main charges brought by post-modernists. Mincing no words, REYNA [1994, 576] concludes, "Literary anthropologists' demands for the repudiation of science, and for its replacement with a thick description innocent of validation, means that they hold a doctrine that allows them to know next to nothing. As a result, theirs is a *de facto* nihilism."<sup>4</sup>

In a similar vein, ROSCOE [1995] takes anthropologists to task for a caricature-like dismissal of positivism, which he holds they then mistakenly use as an excuse to reject the use of methods from the natural sciences for the study of human culture and society. In other words, positivism becomes identified with science and once the former is vilified the latter is dismissed.<sup>5</sup> Roscoe (p. 498) makes the interesting suggestion that anthropology may well be the discipline most prone to this type of thinking in part because of our tradition of lone-ranger fieldwork, whereby one ethnographer tends to have a "monopoly" on the evidence. This clearly raises questions about validity and may have led to a crisis of confidence that has caused some to throw the baby out with the bath water. Certainly one of the more notable characteristics of post-modern ethnography is the encouragement to include extensive details concerning the fieldwork process and the ethnographer's personal history by way of "unpacking" the ethnographer's biases and interpretations. This type of reasoning, however, leads Roscoe to conclude that interpretivism and scientific method are merely weaker and stronger versions of the same thing.

LINDHOLM [1997] continues the attack on post-modernism, from a Hegelian perspective, and is less interested in defending a formal scientific method than in reformulating an empirical approach to culture that allows us to "argue about what it means to be a human being" (p. 759). O'MEARA [1997] is also interested in what science can tell us about human nature. But he takes a very different approach in his attack on the "event account" of science, which he deems has failed, and in defense of a new approach to science derived from the philosopher Wesley Salmon which focuses exclusively upon causal relations among physical substances. The article by O'Meara is relevant to new institutionalism in that it argues for a radical application of methodological individualism that negates completely the causal role of institutions or any other abstract social category at the supra-individual level. For O'Meara the goal is the identification of universal laws that explain human nature. Social variation and similarities are mere clutter in this search and tell us nothing of the underlying causal relations. His article appears in CA which is notable for its format

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<sup>4</sup> Two brief comments critical of Reyna's piece, with his responses, have been published in the JRAI (HIRST [1996]; SINGLETON [1995]).

<sup>5</sup> Though published several years later, WAX [1997] appears to perfectly illustrate Reyna's and Roscoe's point when he attacks positivism and science in one breath.

that solicits comments and critiques from scholars and publishes them simultaneously with the piece. Marvin Harris has a lengthy critique of O'Meara that provides, among other things, a defense of the need to study culture, society, and institutions. He views event and physical models as mutually compatible and necessary. In summary, "Individuals and their behavior create the basic elements of higher-order sociocultural entities, and these entities in turn influence or feed back to the behavior of individuals. To use a slightly different idiom, the parts shape the whole and the whole shapes the parts" (Harris in his critique of O'Meara's article on p. 414).

Just when it might have appeared that anthropologists were hopelessly at odds, AUNGER [1995] made a case for the complementarity and necessity of both formal scientific methods and interpretive or narrative approaches. His piece appeared also in CA with full CA comment treatment giving nine scholars a chance to speak out on the subject - for and against scientific approaches to anthropology and the ability to meld them with reflexive methodological sensitivities.

### *3. Rational Choice and the Strategizing Individual*

Given the continued preponderance of post-modern thought within the discipline, it is not surprising that rational choice approaches in anthropology have failed to capture the sympathetic attention of many scholars. Rationality and methodological individualism are more often casually cited as whipping boys than they are seriously critiqued or practiced.<sup>6</sup> One exception to this is the increasing acceptance of the notion of "agency" borrowed from the works of GIDDENS [1984] and BOURDIEU [1977]. Many of those coming from a socio-cultural perspective have borrowed heavily from these scholars. It is unfortunate that more anthropologists have not connected to the ongoing vibrant debates in the mainstream rational choice literature that dominates the social sciences. The exceptions to this trend are some archaeologists and bio-cultural scholars who have long worked with optimization models and who are directly connected to the rational choice literature, especially that dealing with collective action.

The perfect piece with which to illustrate the misfortune of anthropological efforts at tackling rationality from the GIDDENS [1984] and BOURDIEU [1977] tradition is WEBSTER [1996]. While one should not fault the "father" for the sins of the "son," it is hard to believe that some of the misperceptions about the contemporary usage of rationality would have occurred if Webster had read more broadly in the field and taken his inspiration from different sources. The major problem here is a confounding of the notion of individual and society-level rationality; Webster is by no means alone in this error among anthropol-

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<sup>6</sup> A prominent example of rationality as whipping boy would be SAHLINS' [1996] eloquent piece on the Judeo-Christian cosmology of western social science.

ogists. Webster is an archaeologist and he argues that his Nuragic Sardinian data support his charge that individual behaviors aggregate into a collective strategy that is maladaptive for the society as a whole. As correctly pointed out by a number of the commentators on this article in *CA* (especially Roscoe on p. 621, and Whitehouse on p. 622), maladaptation at the group level does not imply irrational behavior by individuals. Whitehouse gets it exactly right, when he remarks, "My problem with the model relates to definitions. In spite of disclaimers in the discussion, it seems that Webster defines rationality in terms of traditional understandings of functionality, efficiency, and adaptation . . ." (p. 622). Whitehouse also goes on to note that Webster makes his rationality/functional calculations in only one currency, namely, subsistence returns, when in fact individuals may be pursuing different goals. The point here, of course, is not that all individual behavior is necessarily narrowly economically rational, but that we must be precise and careful in our use of terminology if we are ever to make serious contributions to understanding when, where, and under what circumstances behavior is and is not driven by narrow or "thick" conceptions of rationality. Anthropologists have a great deal of expertise to contribute here, but if they do not do so in a common linguistic "currency" that can be understood by the rest of the social sciences their message will not be heard as widely as it needs to be.

Although still drawing most of their inspiration from Giddens and Bourdieu, a series of three papers published together in *CA* (in a forum on "Agency, Ideology, and Power in Archaeological Theory") comes far closer to accomplishing the goal of communicating with a broader social scientific audience. All three papers operate largely from an individual actor approach, but in keeping with anthropological tradition tend to pay considerable attention to the collectivity. BLANTON, FEINMAN, KOWALEWSKI and PEREGRINE [1996] attempt a behavioral and processual theory of evolution grounded in political economy. They (p. 2) set out their framework as follows,

"We assume that some persons in any society will strive to influence the governing institutions of society as they pursue, variously, wealth, status, or power. Political action is inherently conflictive; actors may have diverse political aims, and varying views of the ideal form of the governing institutions and may contest for positions of power. As SEWELL [1992, 22] points out, states are 'consciously established, maintained, fought over, and argued about rather than taken for granted.' Political actors capable of influencing the governing institutions of society are often persons already occupying positions of power or wealth but may be persons or groups (factions) challenging the dominant ones. While political struggle has the potential of bringing with it social and cultural change, it is played out against a background of shared culture, acquired through socialization, that constrains what political actors may do. Culture is not, however, completely determinative, because political actors' knowledge of society's structure and its culture is potentially not just a constraint but a resource that they can use as they pursue their goals. Thus, political actors may, variously, reproduce society and culture, reject it, or modify it as a way of achieving desired outcomes."

The perspective outlined above is remarkably similar to the approach employed by ENSMINGER and KNIGHT [1997], who apply a bargaining power model to explain changing norms in a modern African society. Their paper uses a new institutional perspective and is discussed below.

Both of the other pieces in this series focus upon the use elites make of ideology in the manipulation of others to achieve their goals. Thus, in DEMARRAIS, CASTILLO and EARLE [1996], ideology is turned into social power that is then turned on non-elites to control and manipulate them. This argument is made drawing upon archaeological evidence from the Thy of Denmark, the Moche of Peru, and the Inka. Similarly, JOYCE and WINTER [1996] also take an actor-oriented approach and focus on the strategies of the elite in manipulating ideology in the interest of urbanization in highland Oaxaca. Some commentators take them to task for not giving more attention to groups and the power held there. As they make clear in their rebuttal to the commentary, Joyce and Winter are well aware of the dangers of reifying groups and coalitions. They correctly caution that, "While group formation is clearly important in social change, a narrow focus on coalitions misses the varied reasons that people join groups, the conflicts of interest that occur within groups (Kolb), and the opportunities and constraints that group membership places on individuals according to their gender, status, occupation, etc. Coalitions have important affects on human action, but goal-driven behavior still lies at the level of the individual" (JOYCE and WINTER [1996, 71]).

All three of these studies are arguing against ecologically determinist perspectives and older-style static analysis that focuses upon typologizing evolutionary stages. All are attempting to situate strategizing actors in the process of social transformations. These papers receive full CA commentary, and many of the discussions are fruitful. At one extreme, institutionalists will probably agree with Clark (in his commentary on p. 52), who is troubled by the tendency to cast actors as "cultural dupes" who buy into an elite ideology that does not serve their needs, and he chastises, "What kind of agency or political economy is this?" He beckons to know more of the specifics regarding the incentive structures for the behavior of the various actors and the range of choices available to them. At the other extreme, and dramatizing the gulf that still remains between post-modernists (including those interested in agency) and others, Hodder notes in his commentary on p. 58 that, "No account of agency and the individual can be complete without consideration of how people experienced and made sense of the world through their bodies." This certainly is a challenge for Hodder's fellow archaeologists!

Anthropologists of many orientations have also long practiced more traditional applications of rational choice theory. BORGERHOFF MULDER's [1995] paper on bridewealth and its correlates is a perfect example of this tradition. Here she sets out to explain changes in bridewealth levels over time based on what value people are attempting to maximize. Her findings indicate that women's reproductive and labor value have declined over the years as a predic-

tor of bridewealth payments, while bridewealth is currently used as a bargaining chip to achieve marriages with higher wage-earning partners.

The next series of papers follow directly upon this group and concern themselves with the collective action problem. These papers come largely from the bio-cultural perspective, which has long been at the forefront of "scientific," formal, and rational choice perspectives in anthropology.

#### *4. Collective Action and Methodological Individualism*

A number of anthropologists working in the bio-cultural sphere have recently made substantial contributions to our understanding of free-riding and the collective action problem in small-scale societies.<sup>7</sup> At the center of many of these debates is Kristen Hawkes, who has written a great deal about sharing in hunting and gathering societies and has related her empirical data directly to collective action theory and the economic literature on public goods. Though her paper reviewed here (HAWKES [1993]) appeared before the time-span of this survey, I have included it because of its relevance and the fact that it was the subject of two other pieces that turned up in this survey (BELL [1995]; NETTLE [1997]).

As numerous ethnographers of hunting and gathering societies across the world have noted, people in such societies share a lot of food resources beyond the nuclear family. What anthropologists do not agree upon is the theoretical explanation for this. Many have subscribed to an insurance explanation predicated upon the notion of delayed reciprocity. It is assumed that food resources are unstable in such environments and it pays to store up "credit" with one's neighbors against the risk of future illness or any other misfortune that diminishes one's food returns. Another innovative explanation is BLURTON JONES' [1984], [1987] "tolerated theft" argument that the surplus fruits of large resources are worth more to those without food than the benefits of defending them are worth to those with the resource; sharing, therefore, makes sense. Hawkes reviews these arguments in the context of the economic theory of public goods. The problem requiring explanation is why hunters would go after large game, over which property rights are not secure (public goods), thus necessitating sharing, rather than going exclusively for other foods such as fruits and small game, which are usually shared only among the nuclear family (private goods). Her controversial conclusion (see the many critiques in the commentary following the article) is that men who provide many of these collective goods to the community are rewarded with "social attention," that among other things is redeemed in the form of status and sexual access. In a

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<sup>7</sup> Readers interested in this topic may also wish to follow up the related work of the following scholars: Robert Boyd, Elizabeth Cashdan, Kim Hill, Hillard Kaplan, Peter Richerson, Eric Alden Smith, Bruce Winterhalder, and John Yellen.



more recent paper, BLIEGE BIRD and BIRD [1997] attempt to quantitatively test these three competing hypotheses on data from the Meriam of Melanesia. While they find little support for the risk-reducing reciprocity thesis, they cannot rule out the tolerated theft thesis, and also find support for Hawkes' social attention hypothesis.

Hawkes' paper inspires BELL [1995] to launch an attack on her thesis and by extension, methodological individualism. He faults her for failing to give proper attention to the corporate nature of society that, "cannot then be decomposed into the set of individuals who belong to it" (p. 830). Bell would like to explain sharing among hunters and gatherers in terms of the corporate group as a whole rather than the advantages and disadvantages accruing to individuals (whatever theory one may have to compute those costs and benefits). The problem with such an approach is that it cannot help us understand why people share sometimes and not other times; why people form corporate groups sometimes, but not always. In a counter attack, NETTLE [1997] makes a spirited defense of methodological individualism. For him (p. 283), "the fundamental fact [is] that it is individuals rather than groups who live, die, and reproduce." As I believe he correctly points out, scholars such as Hawkes are not denying the existence of corporate groups, nor promoting the notion of universal narrowly selfish motives, but are attempting to explain how corporate groups and cooperative behavior evolved in the first place.

In their own effort to explain the evolution of cooperation, NETTLE and DUNBAR [1997] move these debates into the linguistic arena, thus drawing in the fourth sub-discipline within anthropology. They argue that mobility in many societies augured against the development of cooperation because cheaters, or free-riders, could easily move from group to group. They note, however, that language variation is universal and serves to facilitate the indexing of social allegiances and the maintenance of group cohesion. It has also been demonstrated in other work that having the right speech variation increases the success of obtaining cooperation. Putting all of this together (in a somewhat functional account), the authors argue that linguistic variation could also increase the costs of cheating by reducing the mobility of free-riders.

In a fascinating piece, ALVARD [1995] tests whether the Piro subsistence hunters of the Peruvian Amazon are conservationists. He suggests that much behavior which has been attributed to hunters and gatherers as conservationism, may not in fact be so. He begins from the economic premise that when confronted with an open-access resource, as hunters and gatherers often are in the absence of property rights, it is unlikely that individuals will forego opportunities for hunting to feed their kin in the interests of preserving the resource for the community at large. Alvard's thesis hinges upon his definition (p. 790) of conservation, which is, "subsistence decisions that are costly to the actor in the short term but aimed at increasing the sustainability of the harvest in the long term." According to this definition he concludes that the Piro are not conservationists, that is, they do take advantage of hunting opportunities that

present themselves even if they have long-term negative consequences for conservation. In a nice follow-up on this article, BECKERMAN and VALENTINE [1996] demonstrate that evidence of conservation among the same population does exist when the property rights change. They note that conservation behavior follows from the privatization of a resource or the collectivization of everything. Thus, conservation can be associated with collectivization, as long as collectivization includes consumption and each individual has access to all of the resources harvested by everyone else.

### *5. Cultural Group Selection*

Group selection theory has recently resurfaced, largely through the efforts of David Sloan Wilson. A number of articles germane to this topic appeared in my survey, including a new piece by WILSON [1998] himself. Those focusing upon cultural selection rather than genetic selection are directly relevant to the study of institutions, as it is often institutional failure of some sort that is argued to account for group demise.

Sometimes group selection is invoked to explain the evolution of human cooperation and altruistic tendencies, thus obviating the need to resort to socio-biological arguments founded on individual reproductive success. These traditions meet head on in WILSON [1998], where he proposes a reinterpretation of BLURTON JONES' [1984], [1987] tolerated theft model of food sharing among hunters and gatherers. Wilson argues that sharing behavior on the magnitude one finds among hunters and gatherers benefits the group more than the individual. Thus, "A group selectionist would explain these behaviors by saying that groups that hunt and share outcompete other groups" (WILSON [1998, 73]). He includes an interesting discussion of the murkiness of the concepts of self-interest and altruism in the biological literature (p. 84), that is reminiscent of similar discussions in the rational choice literature. He and Hawkes, Bliege Bird, and Bird (in the usual CA commentary) also have an interesting exchange on the nature of public goods and the costs and benefits to individuals of supplying them.

BOEHM [1996] approaches group selection by exploring consensus decision-making in emergency situations from three historical ethnographic accounts. He examines two cases of warfare and one of response to a hurricane that threatened the entire subsistence base of the population. What impresses Boehm about each of these cases is the degree to which these relatively egalitarian societies manage, through agreement upon a consensus action, to weather the crises. In short, they cooperate for the benefit of the group and at cost to individuals. While the evidence on how free-riders are brought into line is scant, there is some evidence of sanctioning and punishment.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In addition to the usual commentary following this article in the CA, there appeared also a later critique by PALMER and WRIGHT [1997] in this journal.

SOLTIS, BOYD and RICHERSON [1995] offer us an empirical test of cultural group selection based upon a study of group extinctions from Papua New Guinea.<sup>9</sup> Their sample includes close to 100 societies, for which the percentage of groups suffering extinction each generation ranges from 1.6% to 31.3%. Soltis, Boyd and Richerson conclude from their calculations that group selection on the basis of culture is more plausible than genetic selection; nevertheless, a minimum of 500 to a 1000 years is required for the spread of a single group-beneficial trait. Thus group selection cannot explain cultural changes that take less than this amount of time.<sup>10</sup>

Returning now to a more socio-cultural focus, I close this survey with a review of some recent work written by anthropologists who are specifically addressing an institutional audience.

### *6. Socio-Cultural Anthropology and Institutionalism*

To my knowledge there are only three socio-cultural anthropologists writing consistently in the mainstream of institutional analysis: James Acheson, Jean Ensminger, and David Guillet.<sup>11</sup> Three pieces by the first two authors were "caught" in this survey, and I have included one by Guillet recently published in another social science journal. Both Acheson and Ensminger have focused upon new institutional economics, and Guillet has recently been influenced by law and economics. Acheson was originally drawn to new institutional economics because of his work on the collective action problem among Maine lobster fishermen, and has branched out more broadly under the inspiration of Oliver Williamson's work. Ensminger has also studied common property problems and transaction costs, though in the context of East African pastoralists, and has been greatly influenced by Douglass North. Guillet's work stems from his study of property rights over water in Spain and the evolution of legal pluralism; his intellectual roots derive from Robert Ellickson.

ACHESON and WILSON [1996] continue their well known work on fisheries based upon their experience in the Maine lobster industry. In this paper the authors make the argument that past policies for controlling fishery commons have failed in large part because the science itself is flawed. They examine the

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<sup>9</sup> Two discussions in addition to the usual commentary following this article appear in later issues of CA (PALMER, FREDRICKSON and TILLEY [1995]; CULLEN [1995]).

<sup>10</sup> Although only two pieces surfaced in the course of this very limited survey of the field, anthropologists, including Boyd and Richerson, have also made significant contributions to gene-culture coevolution and cultural transmission theory (see also LALAND, KUMM and FELDMAN [1995]). Drawing upon cognitive science WHITEHOUSE [1996] also discusses cultural transmission.

<sup>11</sup> Many other scholars, especially those focusing on common property issues such as Bonnie McCay, are conversant with and also frequently cited in the institutional literature.

differences between western fisheries management – based largely upon quota controls – and management systems used around the world by a myriad of peasant and tribal societies – none of which monitor output, but instead control location, time, stage of life of the target species, and technology. These systems work, the authors argue, in part because the transaction costs of monitoring these variables are far lower than those involved in monitoring the yield of each individual fisherman. The paper makes a convincing argument and is a nice example of the sort of institutional insights that can come from a survey of innumerable anthropological case studies of institutional systems around the world.

In addition to his work on Maine lobster fisheries, Acheson has also done considerable work in Mexico. In another recent paper (ACHESON [1996]), he takes a creative look at household budget management among small-scale furniture producers in Guanajo, Michoacan, Mexico. He finds that three different household budgeting styles emerge and are strongly correlated with the economic performance of the enterprises. Given the low rates of literacy and poor understanding of accounting in this typically less-developed society, those households that keep separate pots of money for investment do far better than those which merge all household funds. Acheson employs a transaction costs argument within the context of the household to explain this phenomena, much as Williamson has done to explain multidivisional firms.

ENSMINGER and KNIGHT [1997] use an institutional approach to explain the process by which individuals in an East African pastoral society maneuver to effect changes in social norms. They review several theoretical explanations for how social norms emerge and change, but find most support for a bargaining position, that is, those in a position of power are most able to get away with violations of social norms and to set a trend such that those of lesser power who wish to interact with them find it in their interest to comply with the new norm. This theoretical approach is considered in the context of changing property rights (the breakdown of common grazing), bridewealth transactions, and the decline of clan exogamy.

GUILLET's [1998] paper offers a model of the type of analysis that should open the way for greater communication between anthropologists and new institutionalists. He begins his piece by noting the antagonism between the "law and society" crowd and the "law and economics" group. His paper nicely demonstrates the gains to be reaped by bridging this gulf. In a meticulous historical analysis of water property rights in northwestern Spain, he demonstrates the relationship between informal, local property rights, and the state. As new institutionalists increasingly recognize, it is in the meeting of formal and informal that the action really lies (NORTH [1990]). This is precisely where anthropologists are indispensable.

### 7. *Conclusions*

I hope that this limited survey of the field will have served to emphasize to non-anthropologists that even in these dark times there is still much worth mining in the top journals of anthropology. Hopefully even more and better is on the way. As an anthropologist, the most surprising finding arising from this small sampling of the field is the relative weight of contributions to institutionalism coming from non-socio-cultural anthropologists. I explain this both as a consequence of the post-modern influence that drove many socio-cultural anthropologists away from more scientific approaches to the study of culture and society, and also as a consequence of the historical artifact that those inclined toward institutionalism followed Giddens and Bourdieu in a very different direction than mainstream rational choice theory.

On the first account, post-modernism appears to be on the defensive, and one can hope that more rigorous and generalizing approaches to the study of socio-cultural anthropology will again become popular. It is worth remembering that anthropologists were at the vanguard of rational choice theory and new institutionalism before it was fashionable (BAILEY [1965], [1969]; BARTH [1966], [1967], [1981]). Indeed, we still learn a lot by reading these classics even thirty years later.

On the second count, intellectual heritage, many socio-cultural anthropologists may never accept or be completely comfortable with some versions of rational choice theory and institutionalism. This is all the more reason why their valuable insights are required and why those in other disciplines must also reach out to them. Those anthropologists who are interested in pursuing the role of incentives as they intervene between individuals and institutions may wish to look more to the now exploding rational choice literature dominant in economics, political science, psychology, and sociology. In its modern incarnations this need not mean an abandonment of the social context that seems so appealing in the Giddens and Bourdieu accounts. This is an exciting time to participate in these debates because all range of practitioners are engaged in fleshing out the meanings, assumptions, and direction of the field, but there is already a vast array of accumulated knowledge that must be digested before it can be perfected. For those socio-cultural anthropologists who wish to venture in this direction, I suggest a few pieces that are “user friendly” and will serve as an easy entree into the field. ELSTER [1986] provides a general introduction to rational choice theory; CHONG [1996], a political scientist, very nicely demonstrates the usefulness of a rational choice framework to the study of issues such as culture, social norms, and institutions that are central to anthropological interests; NEE [1998] makes a strong case for the sociological tradition of institutionalism; EGGERTSSON [1990] is one of the most accessible accounts of the new institutional economics; and ACHESON [1994] provides a shorter introduction to new institutional economics specifically geared toward anthropologists. For anthropologists convinced of, open to, or vehemently opposed to the

possibility that incentives influence individual behavior and that institutions play a big role in setting the incentives, this is a great time to read broadly across the social sciences and have an impact on a vast audience.

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