1. Introduction

For today’s seminar I have prepared a contribution on a topic which may appear rather surprising. I shall try to juxtapose the work of two prominent sociological theorists, Helmut Schelsky and John Meyer, who - at first glance - do not seem to have very much in common. As John Meyer is here amongst us, some of you, and perhaps he himself, might even feel a little embarrassed about this endeavour. Of course I must apologize to John for inflicting upon him an author with whom he is probably not particularly familiar, and I do.

Helmut Schelsky’s period of influence in sociology goes back to the 1950s and 60s. He was an important figure in the early years of West German sociology, and he was also an influential political advisor. Among other things, he was the foundation rector of the new University of Bielefeld, and he created an entire faculty of sociology there, the only one in Germany. In the period of expansion of sociology between 1965 and 1975, many university chairs where occupied by Schelsky’s numerous pupils, amongst whom Niklas Luhmann was the most prominent. Three other pupils, Joachim Matthes, Bernhard Schäfers and Lars Claussen, were to become presidents of the German Sociological Association, a post Schelsky himself never obtained. His own work was mainly concerned with the study of German society and had little international impact. His publications were influential at the time, but they are out of print today and mostly forgotten.

John Meyer, on the other hand, started to get known from the 1970s onwards, first in North American sociology where he established himself as a specialist on education and organization. With two celebrated papers, “The Effects of Education as an Institution” and “Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony” (with Brian Rowan), both published in 1977 in the prestigious American Journal of Sociology\(^1\), Meyer started to be recognized as an internationally leading sociologist.

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\(^1\) AJS 83 / 1977, pp. 55-77 and 340-363.
figure of sociological “neo-institutionalism”. In subsequent years, his specific contribution to this field was the extension of the institutional perspective to the global level. Today, John Meyer is one of the most prominent sociological writers on globalization processes. His distinctive trademark is the application of rigorously quantitative and comparative methods and his scepticism against speculative and heavily politicized “globalization theories”.

As I shall demonstrate shortly, the intellectual roots of Schelsky and Meyer could not be much more different. So, what made me decide to bring these two “matadors” together? The reason is somewhat accidental and a little auto-biographical: In 2003, I happened to prepare a new course on “world society” and, at the same time, a series of lectures on the history of German sociology. Thus, I simultaneously re-read the work of Helmut Schelsky and, for the first time, I became aware of the range and scope of the output of John Meyer and his Stanford World Polity Group. Quite naturally, I began to relate what I was reading, and I saw a number of surprising parallels emerging. I made a mental note that, some day, I would take this up. Today is this day, and I am very curious what John Meyer is going to make of it.

2. A heuristic typology of “old” and “new” institutionalisms in sociology

If two authors (or more generally: two objects) which one wants to consider together seem to have very little in common, the sociologist has a sure means to proceed: He constructs commonality between his objects of comparison by introducing a typology. That is, he creates a conceptual space within which his objects of comparison can be situated. Even if he or she cannot find any empirical connections between them, the sociologist will be able to establish a theoretical relationship between is objects of comparison (or a non-relationship, as it may be).

Of course, this is precisely what John Meyer himself did in his talk last week. Just to remind you, I reproduce his typology here:
Table 1: John Meyer’s typology of institutionalist theories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phenomenological Institutionalisms</th>
<th>Realist Institutionalisms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>„actors“ as constructions of their (global) environment</td>
<td>Power-centered (global) approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g. Meyer / Rowan</td>
<td>e.g. Wallerstein, Braudel, Tilly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>„actors“ confronted with institutional pressures</td>
<td>Network theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g. DiMaggio / Powell</td>
<td>e.g. Blau</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Cultural determinism
  - e.g. „vulgar“ Parsianianism, „normative“ paradigm

- „structure - agency“-theories
  - e.g. Giddens, March/Olsen

- REAL „ACTORS“
  - Purposive action in institutional environments
    - individual actors
    - corporate actors
    - national actors (states)
  - e.g. RC-theories

And this is my own typology:
Table 2: „Old“ and „New“ Institutionalisms

„Anthropological“ Institutionalism
- Gehlen
- Rothacker
- Plessner
- Scheler
- Malinowski

„Normative“ Institutionalism
- Helmut Schelsky
- Parsons
- Berger / Luckmann
- Schütz
- Mannheim
- Mead

„Cognitive“ Neo-Institutionalism
- John Meyer & Stanford Group
- Coleman

„Rational Choice“ Neo-Institutionalism
- Kreckel
- Durkheim
- Weber
- Goffman
- Coleman
Of course, like all typologies, this one is a theoretical construction, too. It provides a highly selective theoretical space, highlighting some and omitting other aspects of reality:

- **Explain the logic of the map**: Two “neo-institutionalisms” as reactions against the prevailing “normative orthodoxy”.
  My Focus will be on “cognitive” neo-institutionalism; mention “rational choice” neo-institutionalism as a second variant which is left aside in this paper (elaborate).

- **“Anthropological institutionalism”** as further, less prominent possibility.

- Situate the work of Schelsky and Meyer in the map

- Introduce various additional examples

- Mention the case of Habermas, also left aside in this paper.

As I said, this is a typology whose explicit aim is to highlight some and to de-emphasize other aspects. That is, typologies are not representations, but constructions (or reconstructions) of reality from a certain perspective. Just compare for a moment John Meyers typology with mine:

Both typologies are theoretical typologies representing a space of theoretical possibilities. But as I announced earlier, before draw your attention to the theoretical relationship between the two authors I have singled out for joint consideration, Helmut Schelsky and John Meyer, I shall try to find some direct empirical connections between them.

### 3. Schelsky and Meyer: Searching for links

In table 2, I tried to single out some major intellectual influences characterizing the work of Schelsky and of Meyer. From looking at this table it is quite obvious that the intellectual backgrounds of our two authors are very different indeed. (Elaborate)

The most striking common feature between them appears to be, rather, a “significant absence” which both authors share: They both keep their distances from the dominant theoretical model of Western sociology in the third quarter of the twentieth century, i.e. from “normative institutionalism” and its towering figure, Talcott Parsons. Otherwise, there seems to be very little in common.

Let me begin with the theoretical work of John Meyer and his associates. It seems clear enough that the thought of Durkheim and of Weber, and of scholars strongly
influenced by them, has left visible traces there. Especially the later writings of Émile Durkheim (and of Marcel Mauss) which concentrate on the analysis of religious myths and systems of classification, and Max Weber’s work on “occidental rationalism” are important points of reference. I suppose John Meyer will not disagree with this. But perhaps he is more surprised to find that, as a third major influence, the work of Berger and Luckmann (“Social Construction of Reality”) is so strongly emphasized in my little chart. The names of Berger and Luckmann must be read here as place-holders for the various phenomenological influences on the Stanford Group, some of which are also mentioned in my typology. They underline the particular importance of the phenomenological and cognitive strands of Weberian sociology as fore-runners of “phenomenological neo-institutionalism”.

(Elaborate: mention Alfred Schütz, teacher of Berger and Luckmann at the New School, and his “sociology of everyday life” and Karl Mannheim’s “sociology of knowledge”; refer also to G. H. Mead and E. Goffman)

Helmut Schelsky, on the other hand, was deeply rooted in German idealistic philosophy, especially Hegel and Fichte (about whom he wrote his doctoral thesis). But clearly, Schelsky’s understanding of social institutions was mainly influenced by the work of his teacher Arnold Gehlen and of the school of German “philosophical anthropology” (mention Max Scheler, Helmut Plessner, Erich Rothacker as teacher of Habermas). A secondary influence came from the social anthropology of Bronislaw Malinowski. Malinowskis version of social functionalism was neither accepted by Gehlen nor did it find the approval of Talcott Parsons. I shall come to this in a moment.

(Mention also Gehlen’s acquaintance with the work of G.H.Mead).

First, I shall try to identify some further, more indirect links between Meyer and Schelsky (back to table 2):

- What emerges most clearly from this table is the “multi purpose” influence of Max Weber. Everybody quotes him, everybody claims to be somehow following in Weber’s footsteps.

  (This, incidently, points to the insight that claiming to be a “Weberian” sociologist is almost synonymous to saying that one is a sociologist. Thus, Weber may be truly called sociology’s “father of legitimacy”.)

- But apart from this, it also becomes very clear that the influences both of Weber and Durkheim on Schelsky are relatively weak. (Elaborate)
Thus, the indirect connections between Schelsky and Meyer via Weber and Durkheim are not very pronounced.

However, there is one further connection:

Although Berger and Luckmann’s anti-Parsonian book “The Social Construction of Reality” is primarily influenced by the phenomenology of Alfred Schütz and the symbolic interactionism of Mead, it borrows its concept of institution directly from Arnold Gehlen. So does his pupil and former assistant, Helmut Schelsky.

On the other hand, if we look at the more theoretical writings of John Meyer and his associates on the concept of institution, Berger and Luckmann’s “Social Construction of Reality” and Peter L. Berger et. al.’s “Homeless Mind” (cf. e.g. Meyer/Rowan 1977: 341, Meyer / Boli / Thomas 1987: 14) are referred to at strategic points.

So, we may have identified here some kind of a “missing” link between the work of Helmut Schelsky and that of John Meyer: Both their conceptions of institution carry strong elements of Arnold Gehlen’s anthropological theory of institutions.

One might, of course, argue that this empirical link between Schelsky and Meyer via Gehlen is very indirect and somewhat strenuous. This may well be the case. But I shall not follow this up any further now. Instead, as announced before, I shall turn to the question of whether there are any significant theoretical affinities between the two authors.

4. Between Gehlen and Malinowski: Schelsky’s theory of institutions and institutional change

This brings me to part 4 of my talk which I shall keep very brief, as we have already discussed Gehlen’s theory of institutions and Schelsky’s concept of institutional change in this seminar. Furthermore, we shall hear the papers of Manuela Illmer and Ulrike Roßbach on Schelsky’s “sociology of sexuality” and on his theses about the institutionalization of continuous reflexivity (“Ist Dauerreflexion institutionalisierbar?”) in the final session of the seminar on February 3.

As you will remember, the anthropological theory of institution by Arnold Gehlen, Schelsky’s teacher, was based on the following assumptions:

- the human species is insufficiently endowed with instincts which could direct and coordinate human behaviour (Instinktarmut, “Mängelwesen”),
- the human need dispositions are highly plastic and open to interpretation (Unspezialisiertheit),
- the human mind is characterized by “world-openness” (Weltoffenheit) and his biological constitution does not provide him with clear guidelines (“idées directrices”) how to satisfy his over-boarding, but unspecific needs (Antriebsüberschuß) and to survive in the world,

- In this situation of biologically induced “helplessness”, man is threatened by disorientation, disembedding, homelessness, continuous uncertainty, anomie (Überlastung, Verunsicherung). That is, according to Gehlen, man is on the one hand “biologically damned to develop guiding institutions” as substitutes for his lacking instincts. It is their task to provide the cognitive and normative framework necessary for survival On the other hand, the fact that mankind has survived so far proves that man has succeeded to erect and sustain an institutional framework². (Cf. Gehlen, Der Mensch, 1940, 12th ed. 1972).

In his book “Urmensch und Spätkultur” (Prehistoric Man and Late Culture, 1956) Gehlen had argued that the institutional framework of social life had developed over a period tens of thousands of years in prehistoric times. The institutions had slowly “crystallized” to a point where all profound institutional changes must have deeply disturbing effects for social life. Gehlen therefore became a very conservative and embittered commentator of the modern world and the unsettling aspects of “late culture”.

Gehlen’s pupil, Helmut Schelsky, accepted the basic tenets of his teacher’s theory, but he was more prepared to make his peace with the modern world. For Gehlen, orderly forms of social and cultural change seemed impossible under the crystallized conditions of “late culture”.

Gehlen, by the way, introduced the notion of the “end of history” long before Francis Fukoyama (cf. his “Moral und Hypermoral”, 1977).

In order to be able to develop his own theory of social change, Schelsky had to turn away from Gehlen.³ He found his answer in Malinowski’s anthropological functionalism which was based upon a concept of human “needs” very different from Gehlen’s notion. Starting from Malinowski’s¹ distinction between “basic” social institutions whose

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² “Die Aufgabe des Menschen besteht in erster Linie darin, überhaupt am Leben zu bleiben...” (“The first task of man consists in staying alive at all...”). (A. Gehlen, Der Mensch, 12th ed., 1972, p. 63)


⁴ Cf. B. Malinoski, A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays, Chapel Hill 1944.
function was the satisfaction of biological needs and “secondary” institutions whose function was the maintenance of basic institutions, Schelsky formulated his own “law of the self-reproducing circuit of need and institution”. According to this law basic institutions whose primary function it was to guarantee the satisfaction of primary needs are able to generate new needs which, in turn, generate new institutions which may generate more new needs, and so on, and so on.\(^5\)

Gehlen did not accept this solution. When he read Schelsky’s paper about the “institutionalization of permanent reflexivity”, Gehlen was outraged about this “transgression”. Eventually, their disagreement about the nature of modern institutions lead to the break-up of Gehlen’s life-long friendship with Schelsky.\(^6\) But nonetheless, Schelsky’s theory of institutional change never gained much recognition. It shared its fate with Malinowski’s anthropological functionalism which lost out in the 1950s against Parsons’ and Merton’s versions of sociological functionalism.

But this left Schelsky unperturbed. By means of his defection into the camp of Malinowski he had gained the certainty that institutional change was indeed possible in the modern industrialized world. In this conviction, he was strongly encouraged by the work of his second academic teacher, Hans Freyer, who had always upheld a much more voluntaristic conception of social order and social change in modern society.\(^7\)

It is to Schelsky’s treatment of industrial society to which I shall now turn, as it bears some interesting surprises.

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\(^5\) “Sozialer Wandel besteht also institutionentheoretisch darin, dass die Institutionen jeweils höchsten Grades (übri gens auch weiterhin die anderen) neue Bedürfnisse produzieren, die ihre institutionelle Erfüllung verlangen und damit immer neue Institutionen aus sich hervortreiben. Dieses Gesetz des sich selbst reproduzierenden Kreislaufes von Bedürfnis und Institution gilt übri gens auch für die Bereiche der Artefakte, also der Technik, und der Symbole.... Deshalb sehe ich auch vom Technischen her ein Gesetz der wissenschaftlichen Zivilisation darin, dass wir hiermit jeder wichtigen neuen technischen Erfindung (Fernsehen, Automation) jeweils neue soziale und technische Tatbestände und Bedürfnisse schaffen, die wir wiederum ... in den Griff bekommen müssen. (H. Schelsky, Zur soziologischen Theorie der Institution, 1970, p. 20)


\(^7\) Cf. Hans Freyer. Soziologie als Wirklichkeitswissenschaft, Düsseldorf 1930; id., Revolution von Rechts, Düsseldorf 1931.
5. Helmut Schelsky’s conception of modern sociology as “phenomenology of scientific civilization”

According to Schelsky’s view it is the “law of scientific civilization that with every new technical invention (television, automation) we create new social and technical facts and needs with whom we must come to terms.”

Thus, as long as there was technical innovation, there would also be new needs, and hence institutional innovation. That is, social change was not just possible, it was an inevitable concomitant of technological development, and thus of modern industrial society.

This technological determinism may sound somewhat crude today. Indeed, it was Helmut Schelsky who introduced the notion of “technological compulsion” or “factual constraint” (technischer Sachzwang) into sociology and made it fashionable.

On the other hand, Schelsky was far from being a crude material determinist, neither was he an a-theoretical positivist. Indeed, he understood himself as a phenomenological sociologist for whom the notion that social reality is culturally and historically “constructed” was a basic insight. This becomes clearer when we look at two of the most influential publications of Schelsky, his major book on sociological theory and epistemology, “Ortsbestimmung der deutschen Soziologie” (Topology of German Sociology, 1959)\(^9\), and his theory of modern society developed in his long article “Der Mensch in der wissenschaftlichen Zivilisation” (Man in the Scientific Civilization, 1961)\(^10\).

In “Ortsbestimmung” Schelsky developed his ideas concerning the present and future tasks of sociological phenomenology. In clear distinction from Gehlen’s notion of institutional stability, he based his argument upon two radically historicist presuppositions:\(^11\)

- All objects of social research are undergoing continuous change. Therefore, the only adequate method for the social sciences would seem to be the qualitative and individualising method of case studies (p. 77f.).

- But as all case studies are embedded in the “subjective” perspective of the observer, a value-free observation and description of social reality seems to be next to impossible (p. 68).

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8 Ibid.
9 Düsseldorf 1959.
11 He shares these presuppositions with his second academic teacher, Hans Freyer. Cf. His Soziologie als Wirklichkeitswissenschaft, Düsseldorf 1930.
And yet, Schelsky sees a possibility to do “objective” and “value-free” social research using generalizing, and even quantitative research methods. How is this possible? His argument goes like this:

- Schelsky’s starting point is the empirical generalization the “the basic structures of industrial societies have stabilized” (p. 136). According to his analysis the uncertainties of the period of transition between traditional and modern society have come to an end. Due to the general success of modern science, technology and rational administration a system of “factual constraints” (Sachzwänge) has emerged.

- As a consequence the former openness and flexibility of social structures is replaced by a “technological society”, which is not any more open for undirected processes of change. Its development has become predictable.

- This means for Schelsky that “the adequate task of sociology today is ... to make visible what happens anyway and what cannot be changed by any means”.

- The sociological methods to be used to describe this newly stabilized technical world are the methods of quantitative empirical science. Schelsky writes in “Der Mensch in der wissenschaftlichen Zivilisation”:

> “Analytic-synthetic science where the distinction between knowledge and application is not possible any more is the only scientifically valid method of self-knowledge of man. (...) As technical machinery, as social organization, as mental influence it reaches every shoemaker’s shop, every farmhouse, even nearly every negro’s kraal.”

- That is, modern man applies science and technology to his entire life-world. He thereby shapes society according to the rules of scientific rationality. It becomes his “second”, artificial reality. That is, “in scientific civilization man faces himself as scientific invention und technical artefact” (p. 457).

- For Schelsky, the sociological analysis of such a “scienticized world” cannot any more be based on hermeneutic methods and the interpretation of

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12 “Die zeitgemäße Aufgabe der Soziologie .... liegt heute... darin, sichtbar zu machen, was sowieso geschieht und was gar nicht zu ändern ist” (Schelsky, Ortsbestimmung, op. cit., p. 125f.).

13 Die analytisch-synthetische Wissenschaft, in der Erkenntnis und Anwendung gar nicht mehr geschieden werden können, verkörpert sich dann die einzige wissenschaftlich verbindliche Selbsterkenntnis des Menschen. (...) Sie reicht als apparative Technik, als Sozialorganisation, als seelisch-geistige Beeinflussung in jede Schusterstube, in jeden Bauernhof, ja, fast schon in jeden Negerkral” (Schelsky, Mensch, op. cit., p. 462).
meaning. He writes:

“The circuit of self-induced production is the inner law of scientific civilization. The question of the meaning of all this may be... set aside.”

That is, in trying to remain faithful to the guiding principles of phenomenological sociology Schelsky arrived at a seemingly paradoxical conclusion: For him, the only research methods adequate for the analysis of a social world thoroughly shaped and formed by science and technology are methods which reflect precisely this spirit of science and technology, i.e. quantitative methods of social research which try to copy the model of natural and technical science as closely as possible.

Or, to put it in a nutshell, the phenomenologist Helmut Schelsky had come to the conclusion, that sociological “positivism” is the only adequate hermeneutic approach to modern scientific civilization.

6. Open questions: Parallels and differences between Meyer’s and Schelsky’s notions of world rationalization

This brings my short presentation almost to its end. You may ask what all this has to do with John Meyer’s macrophenomenology.

Schelsky wrote almost fifty years ago. This was a time strongly influenced by the beginning cold war. It was also a historical period where large areas of the globe were still parts of colonial empires. When Schelsky thought about “scientific civilization” he had the European and Anglo-Saxon world (with the addition of Japan) in mind, not “world society”. His slightly unsavoury allusion to “negro kraals” quoted above may serve as an indicator how difficult it was for Schelsky to imagine a thoroughly rationalized and modernized world civilization, although he seems to have been somehow aware of the beginning of a process of global diffusion of “modern” ideas and models.

Precisely these processes of global diffusion of a “more or less worldwide, rationalistic culture” are at the centre of interest of John Meyer and his collaborators. They are engaged in developing an empirically grounded theory of the processes and

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mechanisms of world rationalization. Just like the phenomenologist Helmut Schelsky, the phenomenologist John Meyer incessantly emphasizes that the models of world rationalization he identifies are socially and culturally constructed. They are “cognitive models”, institutionalized “worlds of meaning” (Sinnwelten) which have an enormously standardizing impact upon people’s minds and behaviour. And just like Schelsky, John Meyer has no difficulties to see himself as a phenomenologist and yet to make use of quantitative and “scientistic” research methods. In his own research, e.g. in his analysis the “World-Wide Expansion of Higher Education in the Twentieth Century”16 Meyer does not hesitate to use official statistics of students’ enrollment behaviour as indicators of the process of world wide institutionalization of a standardized model of higher education.

On the other hand, I am not at all sure whether Meyer would be prepared to accept Schelsky’s view that there is an epistemological fit between model and methodology: To what extent is there an “isomorphic” relationship between the rationalistic and scientistic institutional models that shape the modern life-world and the rationalistic and scientistic methodology of modern sociology which tries to capture them?

Obviously, I am not going to elaborate now on John Meyer’s own “world polity” model here. He could do this so much better himself, and no doubt he will do so in next week’s Christian Wolff Lecture.

Nonetheless, some of the questions that have to be directed to Schelsky’s analysis of scientific civilization must also be asked with respect to John Meyer’s account of world rationalization: To what extent is it true that we are faced with an irreversible process of “factual constraints”? Or, to use Max Weber’s words, are we about to witness the worldwide construction and imposition of an “iron cage” (ein stahlhartes Gehäuse) of scientific and bureaucratic civilization? Or, to put it differently, to what extent is the emerging “world polity” still open to historical variation (“path dependency”) and politically induced change.

One possible answer has been given by John Meyer himself in his seminar discussion with Sylvia Terpe. He underlined the theoretical importance of the concept of “decoupling”. When he describes the “continuing scientization of nature and

rationalization of the moral universe”¹⁷, this may well sound strikingly similar to Schelsky’s views. But Schelsky was still very close to the position of “normative institutionalism” rejected by Meyer. Schelsky had assumed that the cultural models and scripts of scientific civilization had a strong causal impact on actual behaviour. In contrast, Meyer emphasizes that general models are frequently “disconnected from actual behaviour”. For example, he points out that “nation-state constitutional claims and policies are notoriously decoupled from local practices” and that in many Third World countries decoupling between universalised norms and practical behaviour “can understandably be extreme”.¹⁸

On the other hand, in arguing that the increasingly universal models and scripts of modern world society “are only loosely coupled to the structures of acting”¹⁹ Meyer accepts that the degree to which these two levels are either disconnected or bound together is subject to empirical variation. We may take George Orwell’s highly oppressive and deterministic “Brave New World” as an extreme example of a society where decoupling is reduced to an absolute minimum. On the other hand, in a world civil society where the influence of social movements and of political and cultural pluralism is strong decoupling would be paramount.

Clearly, Helmut Schelsky’s notion of the “technical state” is much closer to Orwell’s vision of an “iron cage society” than Meyer’s “world polity” model. For Meyer the loose structuration of modern world society implies that under the umbrella of global standardization empirical variety remains possible and may well lead to social and cultural innovation.

In consequence, further empirical research is required to increase our knowledge about the spread, the impact and the limitations of world models.


¹⁸ Ibid., p.112.

¹⁹ Ibid. (my emphasis).