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Institutionalism For What: To Understand Inevitable Progress or For Policy Relevance?

F. Gregory Hayden

In two recent papers, Anne Mayhew challenged the approach and purpose of institutionalism [Mayhew 1987a, 1987b]. Her message was that institutionalism should be concerned with describing cultures in order to understand the inevitable flow of human progress, and should not be undertaking analysis for the purpose of social evaluation and policy. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the insufficiency of the base upon which that message was constructed.¹

Western Biases Regarding Inevitable Progress

Mayhew's view, although inconsistent with the history of institutionalism, is consistent with long-held Western biases. Stephen Gould has stated that "much of our evolutionary thinking reflects some of the deepest biases of Western thought" [Gould 1983, p. 95]. "In a crazy reversal of causality, you see nature as existing for and directed towards us, as though nature for four and a half billion years existed only to cough us up at the end of time" [Gould, p. 101]. He defines the four great biases as: (1) progressionism, (2) gradualism, (3) determinism, and (4) adaptationism. These define history as a continuum of progressive

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adaptations, that have deterministically led to the latest greatest creation. At the center of and superior to the flora and fauna is the human species which, in addition, is created in the image of God. The socio-technical system of this superior being gradually evolved in a similar progressive and deterministic manner, so that “every creature and every human being has his appropriate status on the earth” [Gould 1983, p. 97]. Therefore, there is no need for political change or policy action.

Christianity is consistent with these biases. God’s manifestation in the realm of the created universe is accomplished through “the commission to dominate which was given to the primordial man” [Benz 1972, p. 402]. Consistent with the Christian view, “the whole development of industrial revolution and modern technology has ended in terms of a secularized proclamation of this domination” [Benz 1972, pp. 401–2]. These Western biases are of course inconsistent with modern science and with instrumentalism. However, they have influenced economists to develop models that automatically lead to harmony, or equilibrium, or progress, or ideal stages, or proletarian utopias, or similar fabrications.

Mayhew’s views are consistent with Western secular and Christian biases in that she posits inevitable and continuous progress and assures us that our culture and social institutions are the result of instrumental valuation [Mayhew 1987a, p. 600]. For Mayhew, policy analysis and social evaluation by institutionalists is unneeded. In addition, their policy interest has a dangerous and misleading influence on scientific work.

Institutionalism Emphasizes Evaluation

Mayhew goes beyond advising institutionalists not to carry on evaluation by telling us that the evaluation of institutions was not an integral concern of the work of our intellectual ancestors. She offers neither references nor quotes. Let me offer quotes from them to show that they were in direct disagreement with Mayhew’s view. Thorstein Veblen said of the businessman, “the vital point of production with him is the vendibility of the output, its convertibility into money values, not its serviceability for the needs of mankind” [Veblen 1904, pp. 50–51]. This quote is not from a man who eschewed evaluation and judgment. Neither did Clarence Ayres. To Ayres, the economist’s job has always been one of evaluation. “Economic thinking has always embodied some conception of progress and must always do so; for the concept of value is the chief concept of economic thinking, and progress is indissoluble

from value" [Ayres 1978, p. 231]. Thus, according to Ayres's criterion, Mayhew misses the task of the economist.

Karl Polanyi regularly evaluated economic institutions. For example, regarding the market system, he said, but "no society could stand the effects of such a system of crude fictions for the shortest stretch of time unless its human and natural substance as well as its business organization was protected against the ravages of this satanic mill" [Polanyi 1944, p. 73]. To say that Polanyi did not make evaluative judgments would require the rewriting of history. Anne Mayhew attempted that last summer at the London conference on insitutionalism when she stated that Polanyi did not say the market system was a harmful system.

John Dewey, the father of instrumentalism, regularly made evaluative judgments. An example is when he wrote about the forces that "brought about conditions which halt the social and humane ideals that demand the utilization of government as the genuine instrument of an inclusive and fraternally associated public" [Dewey 1954, p. 109].

James Street agreed that evaluation has been a hallmark of institutionalism. He said "for Veblen, there was no credible evidence of . . . a beneficent self adjusting system, and on the contrary, he held that the history of industrializing nations revealed strong dynamic forces . . . in which ultimate outcome was by no means predictable" [Street 1987, p. 1865].

Policy is a Primary Concern of Institutionalism

Even though institutionalism is traditionally associated with policy studies, Mayhew says ² it should not be because of the "extraordinary discovery" that "as we discover, measure, and define problems we also discover, measure, and define solutions"³ [Mayhew 1987b, p. 8]. Her statement is a tautology, and the proposition she defines is inevitable progress. She says "that is what I think was so impressive to those who created the intellectual tradition that we call institutionalism" [Mayhew, 1987b, p. 8].

Her view is inconsistent with institutionalism. Polanyi says that the substantive or institutional approach to the economy always leads to policy. For him policy, not process, determines alternative technology as well as alternative ways of instituting technology. This "conceptual distinction is vital for any understanding of the interdependence of technology and institutions as well as their relative independence" [Polanyi 1957, p. 249]. "The instituting of the economic process . . . centers

interest on values, motives, and policy" [Polanyi 1957, pp. 249–50]. To that we can add Dewey's comment that modern science "is an art of control" [Dewey 1979, p. 288]. Geoffrey Hodgson, in his recent manifesto for a modern institutional economics, states that the principal indictment against economic theory is its "failure . . . to generate policy prescriptions" [Hodgson 1988, p. 4]. Numerous other institutionalists have made similar statements. William Melody, for example, recently stated that institutionalists now have an opportunity to change the world [Melody 1987, p. 1337].

Confusion About Instrumentalism

Anne Mayhew never quotes from or references any of the instrumental philosophers, and her conceptualization of instrumentalism is inconsistent with their work.

First, her admonition stated above, against evaluation of institutions and the making of policy, is in conflict with instrumentalism. W.H. Werkmeister explained that, with respect to evaluation "what Dewey means to examine in particular is . . . 'the process of deliberating upon an ethical or economic problem'" [Werkmeister 1973, p. 42]. This is consistent with Dewey's use of "the expression 'ethical judgment' and 'economic judgment' as synonymous with 'judgment of valuation'" [Werkmeister 1973, p. 51]. From as early as William James's writing, we learn that "the pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences" [James 1907, p. 44].

Second, Mayhew seems to identify almost any human thought process as the instrumental aspect. However, all reasoning is not instrumental thought. Neither are attempts at intuition, nor all uses of rational models, nor the use of common sense. Instrumental valuing and valuation is a "distinctive sort," which must rely on complex models and articulated knowledge collected and processed consistent with valid methods and with the particular context in which the problem is embedded.

When Mayhew says that she cannot practice "instrumental effectiveness" because she "cannot see into the future"⁴ [Mayhew 1987b, p. 11], she disassociates herself from Dewey, who said that "the involved foresight, forecast, or anticipation is warranted . . . in the degree in which it is based upon propositions that are conclusions of adequate observational activities" [Dewey 1939, p. 52]. Allan Gruchy recognized this when he said of the cultural economist, "in the case of the members of

the holistic school, his scientific analysis will be tilted toward the future” [Gruchy 1967, p. 25].

A further disassociation takes place when she says that the question, “Will means chosen serve as instruments in the achievement of ends-in-view?” cannot be asked⁵ [Mayhew 1987b, pp. 8–9]. Dewey said, “the required appraisal of desires and ends-in-view, as means of the activities by which actual results are produced, is dependent upon observation of consequences attained when they are compared and contrasted with the content of ends-in-view” [Dewey 1939, p. 52].

Finally, her definition of instrumentalism as some kind of natural elemental human aspect that automatically provides for human progress [Mayhew 1987a, p. 600] is not consistent with William James, Charles Peirce, John Dewey, George Mead and Sidney Hook, all of whom emphasized that instrumentalism is about inquiry and method directed at practical problems to find policy solutions, or, as Street explained, “instrumental valuation was concerned with the intellectual selection of future alternative actions” [Street 1987, p. 1866].

Description is Normative and Facts are not Given

As Anne Mari May and John R. Sellers explained, any attempts at non-normative analysis and description are futile [May and Sellers 1988]. When Mayhew speaks of “facts” or “empirical” or “description,” she indicates that they are separate from the normative issues. By using the terms she seems to believe that she has conveyed a finality. However, “facts do not exist independently of scientific theories; what is construed as a fact depends upon one’s theoretical framework. . . . Thus the ‘subjective’ perspective of the scientist influences the collection of the ‘objective’ data” [May and Sellers 1988, p. 400].

There is no description that is not laden with values, beliefs, and philosophical decisions; facts more so than most analytical entities. In addition, facts and measurement are more abstract than the other entities. In conducting description and analysis, fact gathering and measurement follow beliefs, problem definition, method, scope, and so forth. Facts must be created by humans who must make judgments about criteria, research design, gathering techniques and so forth. By the time a fact is gathered, judgment has been stacked upon judgment, and criterion upon criterion. With regard to cultural facts, “anthropologists are no less aware than other scientists (at least if they are it’s not for want of being told) that facts are not ‘given,’ but constructed, with the inevitable help of concepts” [Beattie 1984, p. 2]. Thus when Mayhew says

“there is no empirical evidence,”⁶ as if that statement would provide a base of authority, she is incorrect [Mayhew 1987b, p. 4]. It does not. It only begs questions.

When she says that to be concerned about “what ought to be . . . reduces emphasis on analysis and description of specific patterns of culture”⁷ [Mayhew 1987a, p. 599], she is wrong. The “ought” is involved in all analysis. Gunnar Myrdal explained that “there is an inescapable a priori element in all scientific work.” As he said, “biases are thus not confined to the practical and political conclusions drawn from research” [Myrdal 1969, p. 9]. In addition, to be concerned about what ought to be and the policy needed to achieve it, requires description. It emphasizes analysis and is explicit about the ideological base of description.

Dewey wrote extensively about measurement and facts. He explained that the aggregation of discrete items is not measurement, it is mere counting [Dewey 1938, p. 211]. Yet it is the aggregation of output that Mayhew suggests as an indication of nineteenth-century progress [Mayhew 1987a, p. 600].

The Logic is Peccable

The logical constructs Mayhew uses to make some of her major points are less than impeccable. Let me comment on some of the logical problems.

Fallacy of Composition:

Numerous times Mayhew says that institutionalists’ policy interest comes about through the fallacy of composition (See Mayhew [1987a, pp. 587 and 597]). However, the fallacy of composition is an isomorphic concept that is inconsistent with the holism practiced by institutionalists. Institutionalists believe in sociotechnical models that are transactional. They do not look at the parts to find the whole; they use nonisomorphic normative systems based on deontic logic. Thus the fallacy does not apply to the transactional context.

Association:

Mayhew associates institutionalists with some modern anthropologists with whom she disapproves and then condemns them with guilt by association [Mayhew 1987, p. 593]. However she offers neither cri-

teria for nor tests of association. Until tests of association are designed and applied, the association is just an accusation.

Internal Inconsistency:

Mayhew's statement that institutionalists should not evaluate and offer policy advice about cultural patterns and social processes [Mayhew, 1987a, p. 602] is internally inconsistent because in saying it she is offering policy advice about a social process. Science is a social process. She is advising us to change our beliefs and behavioral habits, and therefore our social institution.

Her argument is also internally inconsistent when she disagrees with the idea that "continuing functions serve as standards against which structures (institutions) can be judged"⁸ [Mayhew 1987b, p. 6]. That is the same criterion utilized by Mayhew for endorsing her elemental human aspect as the source of instrumental valuing. Her argument is that it is continuous in all societies.

Exclusion:

Mayhew regularly uses exclusion improperly. For example, with regard to the way that institutions should be treated: "whether described and analyzed or condemned as irrelevant to human progress; whether perceived as the fundamental regulators of human behavior or simply as hindrances to the creation of a better society"⁹ [Mayhew 1987a, p. 597]. What she is describing as exclusive are not exclusive. It would not be possible to know what to condemn without description and analysis. One can perceive institutions as both regulators of human behavior and as hindrances to a better society. How could they hinder if they cannot regulate? How would one know without description and analysis?

Tautologies:

Mayhew has utilized a number of tautologies. One is her insistence that all people in all tribes throughout history have utilized instrumental reasoning [Mayhew 1987a, p. 587]. There is never any indication given about what criteria would be used to test that idea. It is a hypothesis that serves as its own proof; it is defined to be true.

A more serious tautology is her statement that the "instrumental aspect was both *source* and *measure* of human progress"¹⁰ [Mayhew 1987a, p. 600]. If aspect is source, and aspect is also measure, then the

source is the measure because she has defined it to be so. However, a horse can not be used to measure itself and neither can an aspect. Measurement and evaluation, (for example, determining progress) must reach to outside criteria. Otherwise, the neoclassicalists are correct in using prices to measure and judge a price system.

She then added that “recognition . . . was the reason why the . . . aspect . . . assumed importance in institutional thought”¹¹ [Mayhew 1987a, p. 600]. No. Recognition of an entity is not proof. Institution-
alists need more than recognition for proof of importance.

Reasonable and Rational:

Professor Mayhew needs to begin anew with regard to her concerns for reason and rationality. These words have a history and particular definition in philosophy and economics. That is where she should begin. She says that “most people, most of the time, reason reasonably rationally” and later she adds “rational, or reasonably so”¹² [Mayhew 1987a, p. 601]. This is just washing word over word. What do those statements mean?

She also has conflicting statements with regard to rationality. She disapproves when the formalists say peasants are rational [Mayhew 1987a, p. 589], yet three pages later she approvingly says, “social individuals attempt to be rational” [Mayhew 1987a, p. 592]. Nine pages later she disapproves of the rationality bandwagon “which assumed rationality of so many peoples” [Mayhew 1987a, p. 601]. Yet in the next paragraph she approves of social scientists’ emphasis on “demirationality” [Mayhew 1987a, p. 601].

Problem Definition:

Mayhew said, “note that identification of . . . a problem does not require use of the instrumental value principle” [Mayhew 1987b, p. 7]. “We do not need . . . to identify problems because the real world problems with which we deal as economists are ones that emerge”¹³ [Mayhew, 1987b, p. 7]. (In the Western tradition of deterministic emergence). I know of no support for that view. If she has ever worked in a public policymaking office she knows the difficulty of trying to define real world problems. Experienced policymakers are not going to agree with her. The system dynamics people say the opposite, as do those with expertise in technology assessment. Clarence Ayres once said in class that people most needed help in defining their problems because their most serious problems are many times the result of the

beliefs to which they are the most committed. John Dewey devoted great attention to the difficulty of the identification of a problem and wrote a book *The Public and its Problems* in which he explained the need for expertise on problem definition [Dewey 1954, p. 135].

From a holistic frame there are two logical flaws with regard to her view on problem definition. First, we cannot expect the perceptions of the parts to reflect the problems of the whole in a nonisomorphic system. As Dewey said, “since the very need for inquiry shows that there is a *problem* set by the existing situation, there can be no understanding of it achieved until there are new connections established” [Dewey 1979, p. 176]. Second, and closely related, Dewey stated, “as organisms become more complex in structure and thus related to a more complex environment, the importance of a particular act in establishing conditions favorable to subsequent acts that sustain the continuity of the life process, becomes at once more difficult and more imperative” [Dewey 1979, p. 224]. Thus the formation of “a problem for inquiry is perfected by the method of conceiving and defining objects through operations which have as their consequence accurate metric statements of changes correlated with changes going on elsewhere” [Dewey 1979, p. 134].

Universality:

Mayhew has confused universal traits with the application of universal models and has conflicting statements regarding both. My concern here is with universal models. She adversely criticizes investigators who use the same models and concepts and who apply them to different groups in different areas of the world. Those investigators utilize, to use her words, “wondrous multi-purpose models” [Mayhew 1987a, p. 600]. The inconsistency is that Mayhew is doing the same. She is applying concepts such as culture, society, institutions, beliefs, social processes, cultural patterns and so forth and she is applying these to all societies and cultures.

Context

The problem is not that Mayhew applies the same concepts to all groups. The problem is two-fold. First, she has failed to complicate her models and concepts in a way to capture the complexity of the real world.¹⁴ As Clifford Geertz has said, with regard to the social sciences, “seek complexity and order it” [Geertz 1965, p. 17]. We need for Professor Mayhew to help us incorporate the findings of modern social and psychological sciences. We also need her assistance in deciding on

which of the many models that have been developed are the most applicable in particular contexts. Before analysis and policy can be completed, the relevant context must be articulated.

Second, she has failed to refine her concepts. She defines culture to include everything (institutions, processes, patterns, and technology). It is too broad to be useful. At least as early as 1917, Alfred Kroeber was calling for taking account of distinctions between the mental and the cultural [Kroeber 1917]. In 1929 Bernhard Stern emphasized the distinction between society and culture [Montagu 1974, p. 346]; however, Mayhew still does not make such a distinction. Leslie White continued to frame and refine the distinctions in a way that allowed for the current distinctions made among beliefs, values, society, institutions, culture, social processes, attitudes, structure, and so forth [White 1959].

Mayhew's failure to use modern conceptual definitions leads to some of her problems. An example is her unique definition of society "as a group of people" [Mayhew 1987b, p. 8].¹⁵ Society usually is defined as a set of relationships. Mayhew creates a problem by not using such a definition. She raises the issue of the change in opinion in the United States concerning when people should retire. She says this clarifies the failure of the instrumental value principle because we can observe opinion changes "when we compare the same society at different times" [Mayhew 1987b, p. 11]. That is not correct. It is a new society; society has changed. The set of relationships has changed. It is a new *society* even though the *group* might be said to be the same. Thus, with a new context, we should expect opinions to change with regard to policy.

For the holistic economists, validity is to be contextual. Therefore we need the best and most refined tools available to describe the context.

Notes

1. Some colleagues have related that these papers depend on invidiousness because of terms such as: "triviality of analyses of choosing", "creation of basic sticker-price *homosapiens*", "hysterical rejection", "driven by assumption", "in less cautious hands", "hysterical calls for abandonment", "enshrined in recent institutionalist thought", "tendency to confuse", "imperialistic biologists and economists", "purveyors of wondrous multi-purpose models", and so forth [Mayhew 1987a, 1987b]. In addition, the two following paragraphs attribute unflattering characteristics and motivations to institutionalists.

Commission of the fallacy is *easy and tempting* because it appears to provide a *short-cut to understanding* other people and to providing

measures of adequacy that are something other than *our own "home truths."* Traditional history and traditional anthropology are hard because logic and our own reason do not tell us what happened or happens; history and anthropology *become easier* if patterns are logically or reasonably derivable. The *temptation to take an easier route* is familiar to institutionalists who have been *tempted to brush aside* behavior patterns as imbecile, encapsulating, lagging impediments to technological progress. In this institutionalist version of EHS, cultural variations become relics of some earlier rationality and *messy and hard detail becomes irrelevant detail.*

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 1987a, pp. 601–2, emphasis added].

The argument is that the terms and attributions are used to undermine the credibility and question the responsibility of scientists who disagree with Mayhew. I disagree that the arguments in her articles are dependent on the degree of invidiousness of those terms; therefore, that issue is not covered in this article. If I were to surmise, my guess would be that a greater problem was created by the "alarm" and "agitation" Mayhew conveys in the articles.

2. For clarity, only those parts of Mayhew's sentences or paragraphs that are relevant to the particular point being addressed will be included in the text. However her original text will be included in the notes below so the reader will know the quotes were selected consistent with the original context. Emphasis will be added to the parts of her text that were quoted by the author in this article.
3. "The *extraordinary discovery* was that even as we (meaning a society, a group of people) *discover, measure, and define problems we also discover, measure and define solutions*" [Mayhew 1987b, p. 8].
4. "What is most interesting is that both the problem, and the solutions that appeal to Marc and to me, have been developed by society. *That is what I think was so impressive to those who created the intellectual tradition we call institutionalism*" [Mayhew, 1987b, p. 8].
5. "When Marc says that the relevant questions are: *'Will means chosen serve as instruments in the achievement of ends-in-view? Will such ends-in-view as means be instrumental in securing further desired consequences?'* . . . Thus his first question *cannot be asked*" [Mayhew 1987b, pp. 8–9].
6. "*There is no empirical evidence* for either statement" [Mayhew 1987b, p. 4].
7. "Transforming the aspect of instrumental valuing into a suitable strategy for saying *what ought to be* and making it the most important of the institutionalist tools, demotes the concept of culture. Not only is strong relativism rejected, the strategy *reduces emphasis on analysis and description of specific patterns of culture*" [Mayhew 1987a, p. 599].

8. "That is, the *continuing functions serve as standards against which structures (institutions) can be judged*" [Mayhew 1987b, p. 6]. (This is the complete statement Mayhew uses to summarize Marc Tool's view).
9. "A number of disputes and arguments among institutionalists seem to resolve themselves into two fundamental issues: . . .
 - (2) the way or ways in which 'institutions, should be treated in institutional analysis: *whether described and analyzed or condemned as irrelevant to human progress; whether perceived as the fundamental regulators of human behavior or simply as hindrances to the creation of a better society*" [Mayhew 1987a, p. 597].
10. "There was, they both insisted, an Elemental Human Aspect—the instrumental aspect—to the way in which people processed and valued information, and insisted that *the instrumental aspect was both source and measure of human progress*" [Mayhew 1987a, p. 600].
11. "If *recognition of the reality of human progress was the reason why the elemental human aspect (in the form of instrumental valuing) assumed importance in institutional thought . . .*" [Mayhew 1987a, p. 600].
12. "If we move from the proposition that *most people, most of the time, reason reasonably rationally with the knowledge at hand, to the assumption that the patterns of behavior, the institutions, the culture of any people are therefore rational, or reasonably so, then we have committed the fallacy of composition*" [Mayhew 1987a, p. 601].
13. "First, *note that identification of employment and unemployment as a problem does not require use of the instrumental value principle. The point at which I am driving is that we do not need, as Marc suggests that we do, a value principle to identify problems because the real world problems with which we deal as economists are ones that emerge in the process of socio-economic evolution*" [Mayhew, 1987b, p. 7].
14. Included in quote in note 3 above [Mayhew 1987b, p. 8].
15. Mayhew does not consider any of the complex systems' literature.

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