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Institutions

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Cornell Law School research paper No. 08-032

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Institutional Fixes versus Fixed Institutions

Robert Hockett*

Professor Robert Hockett's Response to Professor Richard Miller

Much, though not all, of what I have to say is either going to echo or amount to an elaboration on what Dick Arneson has said, so I'll try to be brief. And I'll put most of my emphasis on those points that complement, rather than simply echo, Dick Arneson's thoughtful remarks.

The first, preliminary point I'd like to make is that Dick Miller's paper does constitute a helpful reminder to us all: We do well to keep in mind always that simply more international institutions, or simply institutions with more nominal authority, will not of themselves suffice to bring about a better world. And it can indeed be harmful in various ways, which Dick Miller has clearly put forward, to fixate uniquely upon *institutional* solutions to perceived global problems. At the very least, we must bear in mind the critical role played by what Dick Miller calls "social movements" as well. Fair enough.

On the other hand, I think that it also is helpful – and I want to emphasize that I don't take Dick Miller to be claiming the contrary, I just want to make sure that nobody else takes him for doing so — to keep in mind that, for symmetrical reasons, we mustn't advocate a global *social movement* "fix" either. We do best, as Dick Arneson has just suggested, to think about the roles played by *both* institutions and movements. And indeed I think that we might even extend a bit from what Dick Arneson has just said: We might wish to consider – to "unpack," so

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to speak – what appears to be a cluster of *essential relations* between movements and institutions. For there seems to be a critical complementarity or symbiosis, both conceptually and practically speaking, between institutions on the one hand and social movements on the other.

There is even a sense in which we might almost think of movements and institutions in the way that we think of left and right, or tall and short, or maybe more fully aptly, means and ends – as being fully operable, and perhaps even intelligible, only in relation to, or by some sort of implicit reference to, one another. Let me try to draw that prospect out a bit in the time that I have here. There are at least three related senses in which, or angles from which, I think that we can see a deep complementarity or symbiosis as between movements on the one hand and institutions on the other.

First, I think that for many institutions the institution can be viewed as a more thoroughly and enduringly organized, rationalized, or routinized *form or outcome* of a *movement itself*. Movements oftentimes tend toward, are expressly geared toward, or indeed teleologically understandable by reference to, *institutional outcomes* – either the creation of institutions, the reform of institutions, the gradual morphing into institutions, or the development of various arrangements which effectively *amount to* one or another form of “harder” or “softer” institution.

So we might think, by way of a domestic example, of the history of the American labor movement. Initially, there is growing discontent, then dissent, among working folk. They feel that something’s gone wrong. They sense that in some sense they are being exploited or unjustly done-by, or perhaps simply that they are miserable. They begin to talk to one another, to share complaints, and gradually to converge upon a common set of such complaints and a common way of describing and framing them – an idiom – and perhaps even a common way of

articulating what is wrong with them and of diagnosing what it is that accounts for them – a theory or proto-theory. In effect, they have begun to theorize their own experiences and what they might rightfully do to improve their lots.

Little by little, then, they begin to think, and then to “move,” in common; they come to constitute “a movement” – a “labor movement.” But this means that they coalesce into a kind of institution, doesn’t it? The movement gradually issues forth in the form of “labor unions,” i.e., institutions, which provide the movement with focus and stable direction, via more or less stable “agendas,” and in so doing prevent effort from being uncoordinated, dissipated and ultimately ineffectual. And indeed these unions for that reason come to be seen almost as ends in themselves, or at any rate as intermediate or penultimate ends – as indispensable means to the ultimate end of improving the lot of labor. (Hence the emphasis in labor unions on the importance of union, of unity, of solidarity itself.)

The reasons that “the labor movement” takes a roughly institutional form, I think, *include* the reasons that Dick Miller himself has pointed out in defining what an institution *is*. But they also include other reasons, reasons rooted in the essential structure – the “group-teleology,” so to speak, of collective-ends-pursuit, as just suggested in my quaint domestic example. One accordingly might quibble somewhat with Dick Miller’s characterization of institutions – his theory of institutions and their nature – but I don’t wish to do that here. So that’s the first point.

I should add here as an addendum, by the way, another quick point that perhaps is implicit in that first point that I have just tried to elaborate and illustrate: It is that there really is a continuum of institution-types moving from the “softer” to the “harder” — from, say, in the terms of the previous example, occasionally shared gripes by commiserating laborers, to more

regular “gripe sessions” by the same, to spontaneous acts of protest by laborers acting in solidarity with one another, to a gradually more coherent and routinized “labor movement,” on to full-blown labor unions with elected leaders and treasuries and offices, etc.

Another example, in this connection, might be more familiar to those of us who weren’t around during the heyday of the American labor movement: Think of Move On.Org, whose very name is quite felicitous for present purposes! If I recall correctly, Move On began as a spontaneous, web-based protest against rightwing obsession over President Clinton’s private life. It was a grassroots “movement.” If you go to the Move On website now, however, I think you will find that, though still quite voluntaristic and grass-rootsy in nature, Move On is a full-blown “institution” by anybody’s – even Dick Miller’s – definition. And I think it’s altogether natural that it would have become such – indeed, had it not, it wouldn’t be around any longer, would it? That will take me to my second point, in just a moment.

We should also note in the present connection that there are various *intermediating* institutions between, say, hard centralized governance institutions on the one hand and individual human beings on the other – friendships, families, clubs, conferences, schools, societies, languages, “civil societies,” and so on. Indeed, this is one way of viewing many social movements themselves: as mediating, not-yet-fully-congealed “softer institutions” standing between and effectively connecting “hard” governance institutions and the individual human beings who constitute the states in whose names those institutions operate. That’s presumably how Tocqueville, for example, would have viewed them..

There is a second sense, also illustrated by the labor union and Move On examples, in which I think we might find institutions to be essentially correlative to or symbiotically connected to social movements. It is that institutions not only grow quite naturally out of

movements; they also are quite often precisely what *occasion* movements, at least coherent ones. Indeed, we might understand movements as proto-“shadow” institutions, as spontaneously developed “loyal opposition” parties to the “parties” in power – the pre-existing institutions.

Just consider, for a moment, how often an existing institution constitutes a sort of a “focal point,” or at the very least an “issue-definer” or issue-sharpener, hence a kind of galvanizer, for a social movement. Imagine, say, that you’ve got a spontaneous outbreak of protest in Seattle in connection with a WTO meeting, or with an annual meeting with the IMF and World Bank staffs in Washington. Things begin with somebody’s shouting, perhaps carrying a placard or even throwing rocks through windows. The rock-throwers do this because they’re pretty certain that somehow there is something wrong with the world, and that the World Bank, the IMF, or the WTO have something to do with it. Yet, if this spontaneous outbreak is actually to become an enduring “movement,” something more must happen:

Over time, what happens is that specific, concrete, well-defined and quite particular matters that are known to be on the agendas of the protest-occasioning institutions come to occupy the centers of the protesters’ attentions, and these then become the foci of the activists’ protests and thus of the movements that they come to constitute. These matters are, say, on the agenda for discussion at a particular “Round” of the WTO, or a particular IMF/IBRD annual meeting, or an ad hoc meeting held at the IMF headquarters in connection with, say, a financial crisis that has stricken East Asia. The protesters “take issue” with the institutions’ handling of these matters that are on the institutions’ own agendas, converting institutional agenda items into public “issues.” And over time, the joining of issue requires both sides – the institutions and the “movements” that respond to them – more fully to theorize and articulate their positions, indeed to justify them.

As this process proceeds, of course, the movement comes more and more to look like the pre-existing institution to which it is responding – it becomes “the other side,” “the opposition.” When this happens, the particular issues with which a social movement comes to be identified have themselves been partly – indeed, often decisively – defined by the *institutions themselves* that occasion the *actions* of the protesters who coalesce into a movement (and often an institution).

So institutions are not only outcomes of movements as these latter move toward greater regularity and clarity in respect of aims, agendas and practices, as I tried to illustrate pursuant to my first point; they also quite often are occasioners, even partly definers, of those movements which subsequently become institutions themselves. They in effect furnish the materials that come to constitute the movements’ agendas. And the movements then either become institutions themselves, as per the first point above – the union and Move On examples – or gain places at the “tables” set in the institutions that occasion their development in the first place.

My third point perhaps in a way joins together and summarizes, or generalizes, my first two points: An institution is often a kind of transition belt or drive shaft for the effectuation of social movements’ aims themselves; and it is, even more than that, structurally speaking a kind of blueprint for what the movement actually envisages as endpoint if that movement has fully theorized and specified what its ultimate aims are. We might liken the institution to a clutch or a drive shaft, and we might then liken the movement to an engine. Or we might say that the institution is the material embodiment of what the movement articulates by way of a blueprint for a better world.

If these are fair pictures or analogies, then note two consequences. First of all, and this is the most obvious and trivial point, the institution will then be either the way in which the

movement's motion is translated into movement forward on the ground, or it will be the movement's destination (or both). Secondly, and this is a little less trivial, note that the structural features of the drive shaft, or the mechanism or other details of the institution itself, will constrain the design or the understanding of the structure of the movement itself. In a way, a movement has to be understood partly by reference to the structure of the system of belts and pulleys that constitute it, or by reference to the form of the institution(s) that would have to be in place for the movement's aims actually to be fully effectuated.. The whole "mechanism" or means/end relation is important; you can't fixate on only one piece, any more than any one of the proverbial "blind men" really managed accurately to characterize the elephant.

Again, in a way this is all just to echo and summarize the point that I made before about the ways in which institutions constitute or provide focal points or galvanization points for movements, and ultimately grow out of movements as well. Note also, by the way, that the structural features of most of the institutions that we have out there in the world, both domestically and abroad, as a matter of history just *are* themselves the products of earlier social movements. And here I mean not only labor unions and web-based political organizations. I mean even states.

In that sense, the drive shaft analogy is incorrect. Instead, we seem to have something more like a "self-correcting system," perhaps even some sort of "Hegelian dialectic" involving institutions, countermovements that evolve into opposing institutions, and so on. And insofar as that picture is correct, it just will not do to be as pessimistic and quietist about global institutions as Dick Miller seems to be. The appropriate response to global institutions' current commandeering by the powerful is not to turn our backs upon institutions in favor of movements, as if that putative contrast were intelligible; it is, as a movement, to take our rightful places in

institutions, or to supplant the latter with better ones. That, as I've tried to suggest, is what movements, by their very natures as organized forms of collective human action, have always done..

Let me close, then, with one more humble and concrete example that might aid in thinking a little more globally and perhaps make what I've just said a little more concretely plausible. It might even, in some ways, constitute something of an inspiration or a cause for hope:

So imagine, if you would, an island territory on which there is a comparatively small number of people who have horses and suits of armor and lances and the like. And this small minority of well-weaponed people own most of the land. Then imagine, at the same time, that there is a very large number of serfs on this island as well, who primarily work the land held by these knights or lords. The serfs live under rather less advantaged life conditions than do the knights.

Now suppose that we, with our current sensibilities and conception of justice, step into this world and look around. We judge that the continuation of this particular set of social arrangements just will not do, and we wonder what we should do about it – or, alternatively, what would we like to see happen in connection with all of this. Well, should we establish a global “island” institution – a “one island government,” perhaps, in order to improve the prospects of the serfs by redistributing opportunities or life chances in some sense? Should we create or establish some sort of a “global” island institution also in order to modulate, and ultimately eliminate, the *warring* of these feudal lords and knights who so often are struggling with one another for a territorial dominion and jurisdiction and in the process harming – indeed even conscripting – the already downtrodden and disadvantaged serfs in the process?

Won't the most powerful of the latter, of these knights and lords, *resist* any attempt that we make to create some sort of centralized structure that modulates their warring and also better distributes the life prospects over the people who live on the island? And won't they, these knights, if they *don't* resist it, *commandeer the apparatus of* whatever institution that we create, in order to ensure that it *actually* works primarily to advance *their* interest? Just as Dick Miller has so eloquently shown that powerful state actors do our current international institutions?

Well, yes. Right? *But...*

But – and all that's important here is in the caveat – England isn't just powerful knights and downtrodden serfs anymore, is it? Nor need the world be. And what takes us from the one state to the other is not only the social movement, but the movement's ultimate institutionalization – its congealing into the stasis that is a just, stable state.