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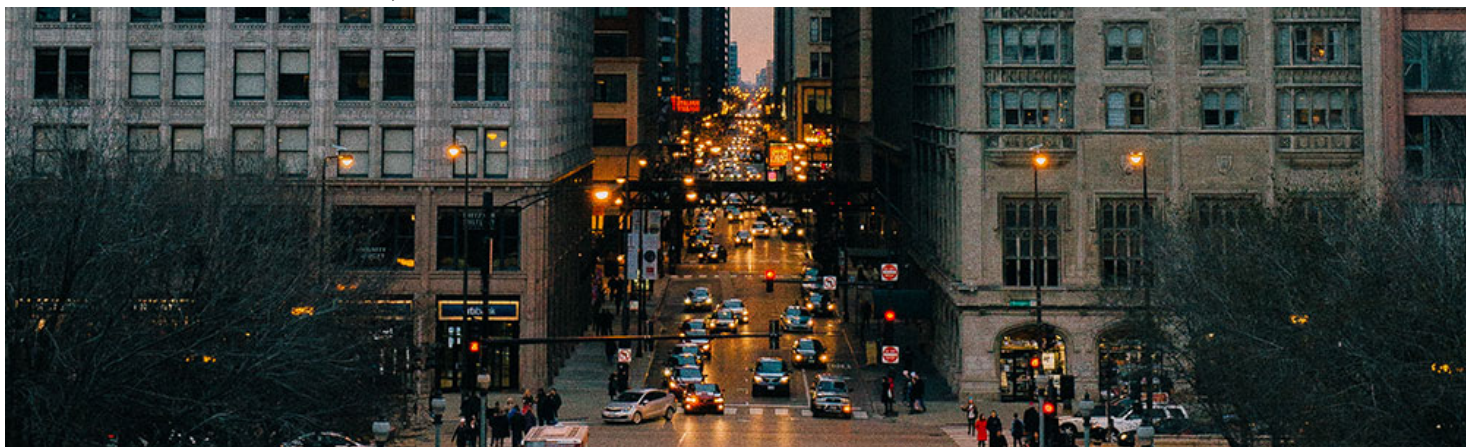
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INSTITUTIONAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP
AND INSTITUTIONAL WORK

“What kind of institutional entrepreneurship can better enable the lifting of society through preservation and strengthening of its core values?”

Ronald K. Mitchell | March 8, 2017 | [Print](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Google+](#) | [Twitter](#) | [LinkedIn](#) | [Email](#)



Some people work “on” a society while also working “within” that society. This “working-on-society” activity, broadly construed, is now becoming known as “institutional work.” One subset of the people who do institutional work is institutional entrepreneurs. And one might expect their work generally to be positive. Yet the results of some institutional entrepreneurship efforts may also at times be confusing, negative, unhelpful, and in need of repair. **In this Note, I address the positive and negative role of institutional entrepreneurs in changing society, to shed some new light on the question: “How did our economy get to where we are today?”** Specifically, what kind of institutional work got us here; and what kind of institutional entrepreneurship can better enable

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Where is “Here”? Some Relevant Issues

In his recent column in the *New York Times*, David Brooks claimed that our new century is already broken, suggesting that: “the 21st century is looking much nastier and bumpier: [with] rising ethnic nationalism, falling faith in democracy, a dissolving world order” at the bottom of which is “declining economic growth.”^[1] He cites, in support of his opinion, the assertions of political economist, Nicholas Eberstadt, who argues “that the U.S. economy has been in the grip of deep dysfunction since the dawn of the new century.”^[2] And the reasons for this economic dysfunction, Eberstadt suggests, are traceable at least in part to:

- The lowest work rate level in decades (down from 64.6 to 59.7 percent jobs-to-population ratio for those 20 and older);
- Deterioration of health, as evidenced by the rising death rates for middle-aged U.S. whites. A 2015 paper by Anne Case and Nobel Economic Laureate, Angus Deaton, reports that while death rates rose somewhat slightly over the 1999–2013 period for all non-Hispanic white men and women 45–54 years of age—death rates rose sharply for those with high-school degrees or less, and for this less-educated grouping most of the rise in death rates was accounted for by suicides, chronic liver cirrhosis, and poisonings (including drug overdoses).^[3]
- Abandonment of charitable work among un-employed or under-employed men. For example the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the overwhelming majority of the prime-age men don’t “do civil society” (charitable work, religious activities, volunteering, help with child care), and “over one-fifth are in Medicaid.” This one-fifth plus, are: “out of work, and not looking for jobs, sitting in front of screens”²
- Less interest among the young in entrepreneurship: “Americans used to be entrepreneurial, but there has been a decline in start-ups

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as a share of all business activity over the last generation.

Millennials may be the least entrepreneurial generation in American history. The share of Americans under 30 who own a business has fallen 65 percent since the 1980s.”^{1, 2}

We have heard this decline attributed to the need for reform in immigration, trade, politics, and so forth. But what if these issues, and their remedies, are traceable to the effects of institutional work; and specifically to institutional entrepreneurship?

What Got Us Here? Some Possible Explanations

Noted sociologist, Howard Aldrich defines an institutional entrepreneur to be a “person, who alone or with others, is credited with helping to transform an institution: introducing new social or cultural forms/logics into the world.”^[4] The process whereby this transformation occurs is termed institutional entrepreneurship or the “collective action by many people who jointly...create conditions transforming institutions.”⁴ Thus, institutional entrepreneurship is accomplished by people through the sum of their individual actions *combined*.^[5]

We can observe two types of actions undertaken by institutional entrepreneurs within society: (1) mutual institutional entrepreneurship, where people band together around a common value or ideal; and (2) solitary institutional entrepreneurship, where people acting in their own self-interest create or support some value or ideal, either positive or negative. Both types play a role either in what got us here—that is, to some of the current disruptions of our core institutions—or what gets us there—that is, to the preservation and strengthening of our core institutions (e.g., democracy, capitalism, civility, and rule of law^[6]).

Harvard historian Niall Ferguson suggests that what got us here is a great “degeneration” that has occurred over the last few decades. Interestingly, the disruption of core institutions has increased as selflessness has decreased. It might be said that core institutions

have been disrupted by unanticipated and unaccountable solitary institutional entrepreneurship. It appears that the ascendance of the core institutions of democracy, capitalism, civility, and rule of law, for example, has suffered as the willingness to make the sacrifices necessary for self-control, delayed gratification, and selflessness that marked the greatest generation^[7] has declined. In this respect, the maxim at the core of capitalism—that everyone’s actions in their own self-interest redound to the benefit of all^[8]—may not, in fact, always be the case. It appears that we may have reached a social inflection point where the *invisible hand* that got us here (capitalistically speaking, for example); won’t get us any farther, and institutionally at least, is producing a compounding disruptive effect through the untracked, little-understood, and underappreciated rise of solitary institutional entrepreneurship. This negative and unhelpful form of institutional work mindlessly replaces norms of civility with norms of rudeness, or the rule of law with budding anarchy. What then gets us out of this so-called institutional mess?

What Gets us “There”? Some Potential Directions

At the University, as in other human endeavors, we rely on the assumption that what we can create conceptually precedes what we can create in actuality. Enter institutional work in its positive role.

Institutional work creates the conceptual framework within which we act and create as a society. For example, institutional *creation work* includes political work, such as advocacy; belief-system reconfiguration work, which may involve challenging and changing norms; and meaning-system alteration work, such as education. *Institutional maintenance work* includes rule-system adherence work, such as deterring aberrant behaviors, and/or belief system and norm reinforcement work, such as embedding and routinizing ideas and/or values. *Institutional disruption work* disassociates moral foundations and undermines assumptions and beliefs.^[9]

Whereas less-than-thoughtful solitary institutional entrepreneurship appears to have resulted in the undermining of assumptions and beliefs in society (and thereby in the economy) that has led to the lowest work rate level in decades, deterioration of health, abandonment of charitable work, and less interest among the young in entrepreneurship (as previously noted); I maintain that deliberately thoughtful mutualistic institutional entrepreneurship such as engaging in the belief system and norm reinforcement of *institutional maintenance work*, and the advocacy, norm-changing, and educational work of *institutional re-creation work*, can channel the forces of institutional entrepreneurship toward both preserving and strengthening core institutions through “collective action” by many like-minded people who together to transform institutions for the better. ⁴

[1] Brooks, D. This century is broken. *The New York Times*, February 21, 2017 https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/21/opinion/this-century-is-broken.html?_r=0.

[2] Eberstadt, N. N. Our miserable 21st Century. *Commentary*, February 15, 2017. <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/our-miserable-21st-century/>

[3] Case, A., Deaton, A. 2015. Rising morbidity and mortality in midlife among white non-Hispanic Americans in the 21st Century. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*.

[4] Aldrich, H. E. 2010, p. 331. Beam Me Up, Scott(ie): Institutional Theorists' Struggles with the Emergent Nature of Entrepreneurship. In Wesley D. Sine & Robert J. David (Eds.), *Institutions and Entrepreneurship*: 329-364. Research in the Sociology of Work, 21. Emerald Group Publishing Ltd., Bingley: UK.

[5] Scott, W. R. 2008. *Institutions and organizations*. (3rd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

[6] Ferguson N. 2012. *The Great Degeneration: How Institutions Decay and Economies Die*. New York: Penguin.

[7] Ambrose, S. E. 1992. *Band of Brothers*. New York: Simon & Schuster. “They had a character like a rock, these members of the generation born between 1910 and 1928. They were the children of the Depressions, fighters in the greatest war in history, builders of and participants in the postwar boom. They accepted a hand-up in the G.I. Bill, but they never took a handout. They made their own way. A few of them became rich, a few became powerful, almost all of them built their houses and did their jobs and raised their families and lived good lives, taking full advantage of the freedom they had helped to preserve.”

[8] Smith, A. 1776. *The Wealth of Nations*.

[9] Lawrence & Suddaby 2006. Institutions and institutional work. In Clegg, Hardy, Lawrence and Nord, Eds. *The Sage Handbook of Organization Studies*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.