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The Weird Sisters of Institutionalist Theory. A Ritualist Perspective
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Value, Affect and Beauty: The Weird Sisters of Institutionalist Theory. A Ritualist Perspective

This paper contributes to the critique of the cognitivist bias in neo-institutionalist theory. It presents and integrates three hitherto independent lines of inquiry about values in institutions, affects in institutions and beauty in institutions, respectively. The ritualist perspective so constructed is supposed to complement the cognitive analysis of institutional life, thereby providing an explanation for the energy that drives human agency in institutions as well as the many pre-conscious, embodied perceptions and decisions on which rational human agency is based and by which it is shaped. I illustrate my argument with a case study about the emergence of the university as an institution.

Keywords: affect; beauty; cognitivist bias; institutionalist theory; ritualist perspective; value
It is, of course, the stuff of every royal Scottish institutionalist’s nightmare: Wading through the fog of your own research, you encounter the Weird Sisters. What to do? Draw your dagger and shout “Damned all those that trust them”? Flee the strange and unsettling encounter and head back to the core of the field? Or engage with these bewitching, life-giving but dangerous creatures lurking in the shades of your scholarly reality?

The rational-cognitivist bias of institutional theory has been criticised by many authors in recent years (among others, Friedland, 2013a; Stinchcombe, 1997; Suddaby, Elsbach, Greenwood, Meyer, & Zilber, 2010; Voronov, 2014). I will build on this critique by bringing together three strands of “anti-cognitivist” thinking – based on value, affect and beauty, respectively – and discussing their relation as well as their importance for institutional theory. I believe that we cannot understand, indeed will misunderstand, institutions if we conceive of them as fundamentally rational, instrumental or utilitarian constructions.

My argument goes beyond gap-spotting (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011) as pointing out a line of inquiry that could also be useful. I hold that neglecting the Weird Sisters in institutional analysis has actually prevented us from, first, understanding actors’ motivation in the absence of clear objectives. It has, second, tempted us into thinking that cognition is the starting point of institutional agency when in fact it is an effect of earlier magic performed by the Weird Sisters.

As to motivation, institutions, as different from organisations, have not got clear goals that members can embrace. While we would expect all structures and processes in a for-profit organisation, for example, to be tailored towards making profit (in theory at least, if not always in practice), an institution has not got the same delineated and explicit objectives. Rather, we
would speak with Merton (1968) of latent functions like social reproduction. This means that a typical motivation like “I want the company to make profit because that means I will get my wages” does not apply to most instances of agency in institutions.

Apart from direction, motivation also provides a “drive” factor. The most important reason why scholars like Friedland feel that current institutional theory is lacking is because it fails to explain the “energy” needed to “power” human involvement in institutions. As we all know from our own experience, having a good reason to do something is not enough to do it. Quite often we pursue activities without a good reason or fail to act despite good reasons to do so. “Reason has achieved what it can achieve by formulating and proving the law; a brave will and a living feeling must enact it”, as Friedrich von Schiller reminds us in his politico-aesthetic treatise (Schiller, 1965, 8th letter, my translation). Pursuing matters of value, affect and beauty therefore stands in a long tradition of the study of the social and political.

Value, affect and beauty, second, form the basis for rational-cognitive action. The Weird Sisters enable us to understand why we think something “fits” or “makes sense”. Cognitive patterns, by virtue of being patterns, are based on aesthetic harmony and rhythmic repetition as much as they are based on logics and semantics. Their elements require a value judgment of relevance to even enter our perception. In this manner, central institutionalist terms like “logics” or “sensemaking” presuppose an aesthetic, emotional and evaluative context.

The Weird Sisters can also help us understand how unintended consequences, as consequences below our cognitive radar, come about. This is important because institutions are full of unintended consequences. They emerge and change while actors are busy pursuing other
projects. Giddens (1984) gives the example of reproducing the grammatical norms of a language while we speak, and speak to express something that has nothing to do with grammar.

From a rational-cognitivist perspective, however, values, affect and beauty are “weird”. They cannot be grasped fully by the fixed, clearly defined and abstract terms academics customarily apply to their objects of study, nor can they be fully subjected to a logical, and even less a positivist, argument. This is why they have been marginalised, even more so in an academic world where one publishes or perishes on 8000 words amenable to double-blind peer-review. On the margins, however, does not mean devoid of any academic input. There have been a number of attempts to construe theories and methodologies capable of bringing the Weird Sisters into the fold of academia.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Figure 1 provides an overview over the ensuing discussion. I have depicted the Weird Sisters on a continuum rather than a grid because they share some traits that resist unequivocal classification: They are intangible, dynamic and difficult to fully express in words. They tend to appeal to us immediately, in a non-symbolic manner, via our senses and sub-consciousness. Moreover, they merge the individual with the social sphere in a way that makes it difficult to draw lines. They also overlap in their genesis. Both value and beauty, for example, have an affective dimension; they are felt. Vice versa, affects can be triggered by beauty as well as by value-laden situations. Furthermore, as we shall see, affects and beauty are socially formed, which implies reference to collective values.
The fact that the Weird Sisters are so intimately related also means that there are no one-to-one relations in the following discussion. While the linear logic of the text forces me to place each topic under one heading, similar features will enter the discussion again and again, the most common being motivation, drive, critical pitch and intensity for the question of how the Weird Sisters are involved in supplying the energy for human action; and concern, body, pre-consciousness, patterns and the living form for the question of how the Weird Sisters play a role in constituting cognition and shaping the outcomes of rational behaviour.

I will first present, for each of the Weird Sisters respectively, a review of the institutionalist literature. I continue with my own conceptualisation, which in part draws on non-institutionalist literature. I then draw the strands together in my description of a ritualist perspective on institutions. Finally I apply the ritualist perspective to studies of institutional logics to show how much we miss when contenting ourselves with a cognitivist institutional perspective.

The Importance of Values for Institutions

There are two reasons why values are important for institutions. One the one hand, they are social expressions of a basic human trait. On the other, they provide the motivation or “energy” for actors to actually put their plans into action.

For the “old” institutionalists like Selznick and Stinchcombe as well as for the classic social theorists like Weber and Parsons, values were the central element of institutions. Institutions constituted the social expression of the fact that human beings were primarily evaluative beings. Parsons (1935) started his very first major article emphasising that the fact that “man
is essentially an active, creative, evaluating creature” (1935, p. 1282). Given that he otherwise avoided philosophising, this is quite a statement. Weber (1988), though rarely talking of institutions as such, saw values as the precondition of culture when he explained that they provided the relevance that lead us to select certain events from the ongoing stream of life. He also conceptualised a certain type of actions as “value rational” (Weber, 1972); a concept that was then taken up by Parsons (1935) to explain the genesis of institutions as part of this action type.

Selznick defined institutionalisation as infusing practices with value beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand (Selznick, 2014, p. 233). Stinchcombe (1997) also argued that institutions emerge and survive because they embody values that people believe in.

With the advent of the “new” institutionalism in the late 1970s, however, values lost their theoretical attraction and were replaced by concerns around legitimacy and an, at times often rather instrumental, desire to adapt and be seen as legitimate. In this perspective, one value is as good as another; their actual content becomes arbitrary. This, Sayer (2011) argues, suited an individualist and liberal political stance where “facts” were considered separate from, and of more explanatory power than, “values” in the form of arbitrary, individual preferences. As institutions became fields of contention and power struggles, it did not really matter who valued what; what mattered was the fact that some people could turn their values into positive institutionalised practices and logics (“facts”), while others could not.

It was only in the early 2010s that values made a reluctant comeback. That renaissance was led by Friedland’s (2009a) critique of Bourdieusian field theory and an ensuing conceptual effort to argue that values lie indeed at the core of institutions. Friedland (2009b) argues that
institutions are regimes of valuation because they constitute objects (and subjects and practices) of value. He coins the term “institutional substance” to emphasise the fact that this is a constitutive relationship with the substance figuring as the highest value in the field. These values, he argues, are transcendental; they are not derived from experience or intellectual abstraction (Friedland, 2013b). They can, in this sense, not be justified - in exactly the same way as Weber’s ultimate ends. Values are, however, not entirely devoid of tangible characteristics as they require material practices to ground them and to make them visible and embodied (Friedland, 2013a). Friedland’s own definition of institutional logics take values to be central to such a logic (Friedland, 2012), rather than part of an effort to gain legitimacy, as the more prevalent conception of Lounsbury, Thornton and Ocasio (2012) would have it. Emphasising the major role of values, a central concern for Friedland is their capacity to explain what “drives” actors and societies:

"Without value, institutional theory is left with an impoverished energetics, with ample mechanism, but no motive, with manifold hows, but no -- or impoverished -- whys -- typically power or pleasure, not to mention base, socially crippled, amoral and truly boring whos. Value, which also animates the agonistic positional game to possess, to near, to embody or to access it, is the basis of energy” (Friedland, 2017, p. 13).

Rather than dismissing values because they might lead to an oversocialised conception of actors, Friedland argues that values do not undercut agency but enable it (Friedland, 2012). Most recently, Friedland (2017) holds that we should rethink the fact-value divide in order to understand how institutional values can constitute objects, and be in turn constituted by them.
This conviction is echoed by Sayer (2011) pursuing an even more ambitious goal of bringing value back to the social sciences as a whole. He argues that the current treatment of values either conceives of them as psychological states in the holder’s mind (and as such purely subjective) or as conventions (and as such purely normative). In contrast to this, Sayer wants to strengthen the idea that “people's relation to the world is one of concern” and that this concern plays out through practical reason, which is a value-laden form of thinking.

In the meantime, other institutionalist authors have taken up the subject as well. Kraatz and Block have acknowledged the omission of values in their earlier theorising as “our most important oversight” (Kraatz & Block, 2017, p. 541) because they agree that values are part of the “institutional fabric”, as they call it (p. 544). Even more energetically, Suddaby and colleagues (Suddaby, et al., 2010) have pushed for a recognition of the central role of values in institutional theory arguing that values, along with meanings, are the “causal core” of institutions.

**Conceptualising Values**

My conceptualisation of values emphasises those attributes that they have in common with affect and beauty. There is, first, their social, shared quality. Values become values only if they are accepted as such by a community. For this reason, values form an important part of socialisation and education, but also of other forms of social influence like oppression, emotional regimes (Reddy, 2001) or the microphysics of power (Foucault, 1977).

Values, however, are not only affected by social processes; they also in turn constitute them. Much has been written about the notion of normative integration, most famously by Parsons
(1959) but also by many other classics of the field. As a reaction to the overemphasis of the role of values in integration, it seems, literature at the turn of the millennium has then ignored the concept and replaced it in a cognitivist manner by reference to institutional logics, meaning and sensemaking (among many others, Mohr, 1998; P. Thornton & Ocasio, 2008; Zilber, 2002). In contrast to this, I would like to retain the concept of normative integration, although without assuming that it can account for all integration processes. Its relative significance in each case is an empirical question.

As intangibles, values also cannot be observed in the same ways that material objects can be. Some authors, for example Weber (1972), understands them as forming part of our mental apparatus for experiencing and understanding the world. Values are, in this perspective, transcendental. Others, such as Simmel (2009) or Selznick (2014), conceptualise them as grounded in our immediate, lived experience (as different from our reflected, conscious experience). Whether transcendental or experiential, values contain a considerable non-empirical element.

This is one reason why values can, furthermore, not entirely be understood in logical terms. Weber (1979) has pointed to the incompatibility of ultimate values, i.e. our inability to choose between them on the grounds of reason. However, even with single values we often have difficulties expressing the full body of their denotation and connotations. This is even more the case nowadays when “pathos”, i.e. the mode of expression appealing directly to emotions, is regarded old-fashioned and/or unsubtle.

**The Importance of Affect for Institutions**
Affects enter institutionalist theory, like values, in discussions around motivation and energy. Moreover, authors use them to forge the link between the individual (micro) and institutional (macro) level arguing that affects felt in the individual body play an important role in the maintenance of institutions. This argument stresses the importance of pre-conscious, embodied feelings and habits for institutional reproduction.

Durkheim is the crown witness for the energy argument having first described the “collective effervescence” powering social interaction (Durkheim, 1976). Collective effervescence is a creative power generated through participation in an affect-laden event as collective representations become, literally, incorporated through affects. Drawing on Durkheim and Freud, Friedland (2005, 2013a), too, would argue that institutions are founded on desire. Weik (2012) has made a similar argument with regard to institutional agency.

A second key feature of Durkheim’s argument is that affect is not something that “springs” from the individual’s core, “unspoilt” by the culture or politics of its time. It is a social and collective sentiment that finds its anchor in the individual’s body and mind. Similar ideas have recently been discussed in the institutionalist literature under the heading of “emotions”\(^1\). Interest was first triggered by Powell and Colyvas’s (2008) call for a microfoundation of institutional theory. Subsequently, Dacin et al. (2010) have examined institutional maintenance by looking at institutional effects on the micro level. They argue that rituals act as mechanisms that socialise participants in institutional norms and values, induce a desire to participate in the institution and provide a “social glue” between participants. Grodal and Granqvist (2014) come to a similar conclusion from a discourse perspective. They find that discursive strategies

\(^1\) The terms “emotion”, “feeling” and “affect” are used differently, and sometimes interchangeably, by different authors. I will present my own distinction in the next section.
produce affective responses that influence people’s decision to participate (or not) in the institutional arrangement. Their focus on emerging fields echoes Zucker’s (1977) contention that emotions may play a bigger role in emerging institutional arrangements in which the moral has not yet become factual. In their study on the role of shame in institutional settings, Creed et al. (2014) move even more explicitly to a multilevel and interdisciplinary model of the relationship between emotions and institutions. They argue that the interpretation of a situation that is so crucial for action emerges from interaction and emotion, and show how emotions arise from a nexus of self-evaluation, knowledge of norms and expectations, self-regulation, surveillance, discipline and punishment.

This interwovenness of private and public is also emphasised in the works of Voronov and colleagues (Voronov, 2014; Voronov & Vince, 2012; Voronov & Weber, 2016). They stress the mutual determination of emotions and institutions in the same way as Mead would consider self and society to be two sides of the same coin. Emotions are institutionally conditioned. At the same time they form the prerequisite for people’s participation in institutions as individuals are connected to the institutional field through emotional investment. Instead of viewing actors as “having” emotions, Voronov and Weber (2016) argue that actorhood is an intersubjective accomplishment based on a person’s emotional competence to self-regulate and convince others of their display of emotions. This enables theories of institutional change to abandon “given” actorial interests (that then clash with institutional prescriptions to trigger change) and study the formation of interests instead.

**Conceptualising Affect**
My own perspective is in line with abovementioned ideas of the social nature of affects and their connection with evaluation. I would also draw attention to our inability to give full expression to them through the means of language. In both respects, my conceptualisation will provide the link to beauty as discussed in subsequent sections.

My view is informed by the work of the neurobiologist Antonio Damasio. He describes feelings as:

“… the perception of a certain state of the body along with the perception of a certain mode of thinking and of thoughts with certain themes. Feelings emerge when the sheer accumulation of mapped details reaches a certain stage” (Damasio, 2004, p. 86).

Damasio’s “feelings” are my “affects”. I prefer the latter term simply because it is the term more often used in the social sciences since the inception of the “affective turn” (Clough, 2008; Thompson & Willmott, 2016; Thrift, 2004). Damasio (2004) distinguishes between emotions and feelings (see Table 1). For him, emotions are very early evolutionary reactions to favourable or unfavourable environments. They can be found in monocellular organisms and do not require consciousness, a brain or even a differentiated nervous system. Feelings, on the other hand, have only developed with the advent of the human species. Damasio (2004, p. 6) defines them as expressions of human flourishing or distress as they occur in mind and body. They contribute to the homeostatic regulation of the human body. Feelings are the results of an interplay of many body maps (i.e. inner perceptions of parts and states of the body), thoughts and modes of thinking (e.g. attentiveness, speed of image change). Put more simply, feelings are perceptions of processes inside a person’s own body.
Although the inner monitoring continues all the time, the perceptions are only felt when the activity of the various parts reaches a “critical pitch” (2004, p. 86). Damasio (2000, p. 287) cites the “remarkable but unsung” American philosopher Susanne Langer (Cromby, 2015; Langer, 1967, 1970; Reese, 1977) as crown witness for this idea. This critical pitch is reached when the nervous system becomes highly stimulated following an input from the body’s environment. The input relates, first, to an evaluative perception in the sense of “good/bad for me”. Second, it relates to a composite or integrated picture in which the various smaller perceptions are perceived to be in harmony or conflict.

A critical pitch is a dynamic phenomenon. It cannot be observed in isolation but is defined by what comes before and after. It is a part of a process. Human beings, Damasio and Langer argue, feel because their body and mind processes flow together in a particular way and cross a threshold. The confluence of various flows can be most generally described in terms of growth/decline, mutual reinforcement/cancelling out, tension/resolution.

A dynamic pattern of feelings is difficult to describe in simple words. Feeling “happy” or “sad” are quite vague terms and fail to convey the processual aspect of the feeling altogether. Cromby (2015) gives examples like “the sinking feeling of dread” or the feeling of an inarticulate refusal, and quotes William James (1890, p. 246): “We ought to say a feeling of, and a feeling of if, a feeling of but, and a feeling of by, quite as readily as we say a feeling of blue or feeling of cold”. Whitehead echoes this refusal to substantivize the object of feelings by explaining that we should not think of feeling a hot iron or feeling the heat of the iron but of feeling the iron hotly (Cooper, 1993).
This conceptualisation of affect not only provides a sound neurobiological foundation, it also prepares the ground for linking affect to beauty. Both the “coming together in a critical pitch” and the “a feeling of, if and but” will figure prominently in my conceptualisation of beauty.

The Importance of Beauty for Institutions

Long before the clunky machinery of our deliberative cognition (DiMaggio, 1997) gets up to speed, we have decided whether we like a person or not, whether we want to join or leave a crowd, or whether we believe this piece of information or not. A large part of this decision is based on the right time or timing (rhythm) and on our perception of how the newcomer fits with what we have and what we expect (harmony). Beauty, in the sense of a pleasing quality of arrangement, also lies at the basis of our susceptibility to rhetorics and architecture, to 2x2 matrices, and our love of the number three (as displayed in this sentence). Like its sisters, beauty is as much as social as it is an individual phenomenon. Like them, it is anchored in the individual body but subject to socialisation, acculturation and discipline.

Beauty is the concept least studied in institutionalist theory. Less than a handful of institutionalist authors have discussed it in its own right (see below). While mainstream research at least acknowledges values and affect as important aspects of social life (though without studying them), beauty is considered a mere ornament to social life, an indulgence to be consumed once the vital functions have been satisfied. More than values, it is also considered either purely subjective and arbitrary or entirely dependent on fashion and convention (and as such arbitrary as well). As with values, I argue that this is not the case.
Beauty is involved in the core definitions of institution; it has just never been recognised as such. Whenever scholars talk about rhythms, they talk about an aesthetic property. When they talk about elements “fitting together” or forming a pattern, they also talk about an aesthetic relation (for which I will use the old term “harmony”).

With regard to institutional theory, many definitions emphasise the repetitive character of institutions, for example, as enduring regularities (Crawford & Ostrom, 1995) or broad patternings (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). There is no doubt that institutions have recurring elements; this is indeed why they arise in the first place (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Their repetitive character enables us to predict certain outcomes and courses of action, which not only makes us feel secure (Giddens, 1984) but also creates efficiency effects (Douglas, 1987). In this sense, institutionalist theory has always had an unrecognised aesthetic dimension to it.

If rhythm is the quantitative aspect of patternings, harmony is the qualitative one. Rao and Giorgi (2006) show that social logics are more mutable when they are rife with ambiguity and contradiction (and hence more stable in their absence). Rao and Kenney (2008) refer to “new settlements” that must be reached before new organisational forms can be introduced. Clemens and Cook (1999) also point to a certain integration of institutional elements that is necessary for the institution to endure. The same goes for the contention that new institutional elements cannot be too different from established arrangements, otherwise they will likely be rejected (among others, Misangyi, Weaver, & Elms, 2008).

Apart from these unrecognised aesthetic arguments, beauty in institutions has been discussed explicitly, though under different headings, by Quattrone (2015), Dacin et al. (2010) as well as Siebert et al. (2017).
Quattrone’s (2015) research on accounting practices illustrates quite beautifully how institutions, through harmony and rhythm, create intensities that become effective in the behaviour of their members (see my previous point about critical pitches). His insight that the Jesuit imaginaries crafted through rhetoric and architecture were not representational but performative in nature directs attention to their aesthetic qualities.

Classic architecture is the art of ratios or proportions with the aim of achieving a harmonic ensemble. In this sense institutional objects can display harmony or be arranged in harmony with each other. Harmony is, however, not limited to material objects. As Quattrone points out, rhetoric translates notions of harmony into the discursive sphere. Rhetoric is the art of arranging discursive elements in a way to produce effects that would not be achieved by logical reasoning because they speak to moods and emotions (hence it is often accused of manipulating on a sub-conscious level). Both architecture and rhetoric are, in this sense, not rational-cognitive but aesthetic devices.

It was, according to Quattrone, the arrangement of architectural elements or phrases that produced knowledge (2015, p. 9) and eventually “helped construct visions of truth” (p. 10). Accounting was intended to arrange the college’s economic transactions in a way that “… the final synthesis would allow viewing ‘with a single and brief pen stroke, represented as in a most shining mirror, in the briefest sum, the whole status of the House or college’” (p. 20).

The description of formal dining at a Cambridge college (Dacin, et al., 2010) echoes Quattrone’s point about the impact of architectural and spatial arrangements on immediate experience. The arrangement of the tables in the hall (2010, Figure 1) show a geometry of
progress, a “way” leading from the bottom end to the dais bathed in light by the big window at the head. The presentation of the event marks it as special but at the same time as going back hundreds of years. As one participant says:

“It is a grand thing to feed where so many great men have fed before; to reflect that their Hall formed part of their daily life […] because it is equally grand to think that I may have a future archbishop on my right and a lord chancellor on my left” (2010, p. 1403).

The impact of the ceremony is, however, not limited to the evening. Dacin et al.’s main point is how this particular event has a bearing on the maintenance of the institution by transforming members’ values and identities in a way that aids institutional reproduction.

A similar effect of hallowed halls and grand architecture, as well as of a rhythmic occurrence of ceremonial occasions, has been documented in the study of Siebert et al. on Scottish advocates (Siebert, Wilson, & Hamilton, 2017). Despite the many anachronisms of the profession (for example that aspiring lawyers have to give up paid work for nine months or that they are not allowed access to certain parts of the building), the authors come to the conclusion that “… advocates accept the quirky rules [because of] the enchanting quality of the space occupied by them” (2017, p. 1622). They characterise this enchantment as part of the emotional and aesthetic setup of the place resulting in attracting individuals to an institution.

Summing up, beauty, in terms of the qualitative and quantitative aspects of arrangements, can create an intensity that acts in a performative way. As such, it is no longer “just” a pleasing display or representation of something but a force in its own right. This force affects us in a
subconscious, bodily way changing our perceptions and making us experience events differently.

**Conceptualising Beauty**

My conceptualisation of beauty, therefore, centres on aesthetic integration (harmony) and rhythm. Both can intensify our feelings of certain events. They can, vice versa, also express feelings, and often do more justice to the subtle shades and complexities of a feeling than a mere word. This is due to the fact that they do not operate through abstraction and retain a dynamic quality.

As with affect, my perspective draws on Langer, who explains at length how the arts are the activity most suitable to express feelings (Langer, 1951). A piece of music, for example, with its harmonies and dissonances, its tensions and resolutions, its growing excitement and moments of rest, presents us with a pattern that mirrors the pattern of feelings. I will present her argument as applied to the arts first and then explain how it relates to institutions in the second part of the section.

Due to this dynamic setup, art is able to express life “as it happens”, i.e. in its living, abundant flow. This flow cannot be pinned down to one single description but is always full of subtle shades and stark contrasts, brimming potentials and lurking threats as well as the movement of growth and decline, tension and resolution. To capture this flow a work of art needs to have a “living form” as Langer (1951) terms it. This living form is a gestalt that can be spotted in such early works as the bison portrayed in the caves of Altamira (Figure 2). The few lines indicate
a balance amid tensions that give a feeling of aliveness to the picture and speak directly to the viewer.

A similar strike of artistic mastery is Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa (Figure 3, left), where the aliveness of the composition is created by its ambiguity, the vagueness of detail in the background, the tension between the direction of her glance and the line of her shoulders. The contrast becomes even more striking if compared to a “standard portrait” of the time (Figure 3, right). In addition, the Mona Lisa adds another moment of engagement by intriguing the spectator. Like life, this is not an open-and-shut case; the smile is pointing to something beyond the picture, to several potentials that may or may not be realised in the future.

The same, in a different art form, can be said for Shakespeare’s Hamlet, a character equally convincingly interpreted by Laurence Olivier’s hesitant rendition (Olivier, 1948) as by Franco Zeffirelli’s/Mel Gibson’s action hero (Zeffirelli, 1990). There is a savvy, unscrupulous prince in Hamlet, as he disposes of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (V, ii), immediately understands the threat Fortinbras poses (IV, iv) and dominates the final fight by his sword fighting skills (V, ii, 243-253), just as much as there is a doubter over the nature of the ghost (I, iv), a procrastinator (III, iii, 73ff.) and tragic loser. The fine line between madness as a ruse to deceive the court and real desperation is crossed repeatedly in both directions. It is this ambiguity and tension, played out in so many shades, that has drawn audiences over the centuries.
The “living form” is hence an art symbol that sets forth how vital tensions appear (Langer, 1970, p. xix). The symbol always appears organic, as one symbol whose elements, if taken in isolation, mean nothing. Our engagement with it is not based on reasoning or a conceptual appreciation of the gestalt but its immediate appeal to our senses by way of a structural-metaphorical semblance. The semblance is metaphorical because it comes from a different field; life is not art. It is structural because its effect does not rest on one-to-one likenesses of single elements but on the relationships between the elements, i.e. the arrangement. As Langer (1951, p. 244) explains for music: It “sounds the way moods feel”.

Beauty, however, not only expresses feelings; it can also create them. As we have seen in Quattrone’s study, harmony and rhythm are prime instruments to intensify experiences so that they reach a critical pitch. This should be evident to anybody who has experienced, for example, a rhythmic chant in a football stadium or rhythmic clapping at a concert. Harmony without rhythm can be felt in instances where “everything goes right” or where there is a “perfect match”, again creating a sort of elation. The intensity felt in these moments is compelling and, in an institutional context, a source of the compulsion we feel towards institutions. It is also directly related to Durkheim’s (1976) notion of “collective effervescence” that underpins his theory of institutions.

When studying institutions, we should therefore pay attention to, first, the harmonies and rhythms of the institutional arrangement, i.e. the manner in which institutional subjects, objects, practices and discourses relate to each other. To this date, we have no vocabulary to even describe, let alone analyse, such arrangements. While individual case studies may describe how practice X relates to the field position of actor Y or how certain discourses reappear over time, there is no vocabulary to systematise these relations over many case studies in order to study
differences and commonalities like we have, for example, in literature studies with rhythms like anapaests and dactyls or rhyming patterns like tail rhymes and internal rhymes.

We should, second, study intensities rather than just positivities. A given institutional arrangement may persist over time but vary in intensity as institutions wax and wane.

Related to that is, third, a study of the dynamics of the arrangement in the sense of the living form presented earlier. If an institution is a recognisable “one” or unit, and if this unit is not just born of analytical choice, then this “one” appeals to our senses by way of a structural-metaphorical semblance, to use Langer’s words again. Far too often, I think, we take for granted that we recognise certain behaviours and communication as belonging to one institution, or that we recognise certain behaviours and communication as belonging to the same institution over time. If there is a “one” institution in it, we should study this oneness more in depth.

*When Shall We Three Meet Again? A Ritualist Perspective*

The previous sections have portrayed the Weird Sisters as compelling forces combining individual and collective features. All three are, to a certain extent, beyond verbalisation and hence resist, to a certain extent, subsumption under a logical scheme. More magically even, the three are related in a number of ways, so that the boundaries between them become quite blurred.

As we have seen, both values and affects can be considered to provide the “drive” or “energy” introduced at the beginning of this article, the actual force to propel human action forward. In a similar vein, beauty creates intensity that can then trigger affectual responses. All three have
a dual nature in the sense that they are individually anchored as well as socially constituted and regulated. This means that the classic distinction between the individual and the environment (or the social or the institution, depending on focus) becomes quite difficult to uphold. On top of that, all three have a degree of vagueness that makes it impossible to fully express them in a propositional structure. They come with nuances and shades that can be felt but rarely pinned down in words.

Beauty fundamentally redirects our scholarly attention to the effects of patterns. While institutional theory is used to focusing on elements of patterns, for example people, actions or communication, the ritualist perspective focuses on the relation (or pure form) of these elements and the patterns they create. It focuses, to take a discursive example, on the relation of acts of communication to other acts of communication or to people rather than on the content of that communication. Typical questions would be questions like: When did it appear in relation to X? How often did it appear? What consequences did the repetition have? As one has to study these questions over time, the ritualist perspective is essentially a dynamic perspective.

Through their harmonic and rhythmic arrangement, patterns can, as I have explained above, create intensities of feeling that provide the energy for action. This happens at a pre-cognitive, pre-conscious stage because it is, according to Damasio, linked to the primal human setup that requires us to evaluate our surroundings in terms of “good/bad for me” and to produce immediate affective responses. This primal setup is part of the automatic cognition preceding and influencing deliberate cognition (DiMaggio, 1997).

This variety of connections between the three concepts have led me to combine the study of values, affects and beauty into one analytical perspective that I will call “ritualist”. I have chosen this adjective not only because a “Weird Sisters Perspective” would sound rather clunky
and violate our scholarly aesthetics, but also because the notion of ritual is an established one in the religious, anthropological and sociological study of value, affect and beauty.

Rituals have perhaps become less obvious in modern societies. Like with institutions and institutionalisation, it is probably more useful to think of rituals in degrees rather than categories. Activities can display certain degrees of ritualization. Goffman (1955) found rituals in the informal sphere of everyday encounters; Collins (2004) formalised Goffman’s work in a way that shows remarkable parallels to my argument concerning the Weird Sisters. The four requirements for a ritual he identifies are: physical co-presence of two or more people, mutual awareness, shared focus of attention and shared emotion. As people then perform the ritual, they “create rhythmic entrainment, meaning that participants will begin to move in synch with each other, either in physically obvious ways or through micro-coordination below the level of conscious awareness…” (Summers-Effler, 2006: 138). Successful rituals, according to Collins, create positive, enthusiastic and moral feelings and group solidarity. His definition therefore combines the salient aspects of my previous discussion: embodiment, shared emotions, rhythm, pleasure, morality and solidarity.

I do, however, not suggest to study rituals as such but apply a ritualist perspective. The difference lies in my conviction that there is a ritual aspect to all institutional happenings rather than clearly demarcated events called rituals.

A Ritualist Perspective on Institutional Logics

To support my introductory point about the gaps in cognitivist institutional theory and the ability of the ritualist perspective to fill them, I would now ideally take a case study from the institutional logics perspective (as, arguably, the most popular variant of cognitivist
institutional theory) and re-analyse it from a ritualist perspective. This is, however, problematic or even impossible for a number of reasons. First, the ensuing critique would be an external one disregarding the study’s own objectives and criteria of validity. Second, the data, as presented in a published article, has undergone considerable aggregation and filtering so that the ritualistically relevant aspects would in all likelihood not have survived. Third, even the raw data would probably not show much about the Weird Sisters given that it was collected with a different theoretical framework.

For these reasons, I have resorted to re-analysing a case study of my own (Author XXXX) that was originally published before I encountered the Weird Sisters and was framed in the institutional logics approach of the time. I have now revisited it and collected some more data to make my case for a ritualist perspective.

The case study is based on the historical accounts of Denifle (1885, 1889), Rashdall (1886, 1936), Compayré (1893) and Le Goff (1986) and traces the emergence of a new institution, viz. the university, in the Paris of the 12th century. In the original publication, the emergence process was framed as a shift from an earlier to a new institutional logic. The earlier “hermetic” logic regarded knowledge as something precious to be guarded and shut away, accessible only to a few. The new “public” logic regarded it as something that grows when distributed and something that everybody, in principle, should have access to. This new logic was accompanied by the emergence of new actors, new teaching practices and new technologies, all of which enabled and constrained each other in a circle of structuration (Giddens, 1984; Misangyi, et al., 2008). One actor in particular, Peter Abelard, used his newfound resources to push the new logic in a manner that characterises an institutional entrepreneur.

A ritualist reinterpretation of the case suggests an abandoning the cognitive causal role of the shift of logics and a redefinition the entrepreneurial role of Abelard. In other words, I argue
now that the emergence of the institution was not primarily brought about by a change in thinking. People felt, evaluated and acted first, and only over time reframed their thinking accordingly. The new logic was, therefore, an effect rather than a cause.

Values and intensity

The 12th century marks a fascinating time in European history because it is home to a phenomenon commonly referred to as the “Renaissance of the 12th century”. In the preceding 150 years, France and most of Europe had been involved in a gruesome transformation from tribal to feudal societies and witnessed all-out warfare as well as societal disintegration and alienation. The 12th century marks the end of this and even seems to make up for it by an outburst of aesthetic, political and technological innovation that Rashdall (1886, p. 645) describes, quite poignantly, as a “general revivification of the human spirit”. People are aware of creating something new – the term “modernus” becomes popular – and they do it with a certain excitement and confidence in the capacities of the individual human being. The century also gives birth to a new form of education as represented by the university. The first universities are not founded by decree but “ex consuetudine”, i.e. emerge over decades as certain practices become established. At its organisational beginnings stand guilds, of masters and of students, the latter coming from the new middle class of the cities, the former seeing themselves as “professional” teachers (rather than as monks or clerics). What is taught and how it is taught is, for the first time, based on reason, not on the voice of the Church Fathers. This reason also guides research, i.e. the discovery of new truths. What students get out of it is, for the first time, social mobility as their new degrees prepare them to become high-ranking clerics in papal, royal or baronial service. In all of these aspects, the university expresses, through its arrangements, the positive valuations of the time.
The university’s core valuation can be identified as knowledge, bearing in mind that we are not talking about an object but a dynamic arrangement of mental and physical activities. This dynamic arrangement is, from the beginning, fraught with tensions that drive it to this very day, for example: Should universities charge for their teaching or is knowledge a good of such value that it should be distributed for free? To what extent should teaching be controlled by the state or church; to what extent should reason reign supreme? To what extent are universities obliged to legitimise the powers that be in exchange for privileges? Should universities provide vocational training or is knowledge as such valuable? These tensions would, over the next centuries up to the present, be in constant flux with one pole waning while the other waxed, one pole resonating with, and the other conflicting with, new social and cultural structures. In the 12th century, they are probably most condensed and visible in their embodiment in two major players: Peter Abelard and St. Bernard of Clairvaux. To characterise both in brief but crude terms, here is the brilliant polymath and rhetorician championing free debate and the absolute power of reasoning; there the equally powerful orator, conservative champion of the existing order and right hand man of the Pope. When they clash, in published documents or in front of large lay audiences, they talk about knowledge, but in terms of eternal damnation or in the spectre of a Europe overrun by the Muslim world. Bernard will be the man eventually issuing the call to arms for the second crusade, while Abelard writes that even the infidel cannot be judged morally until he has been engaged in a debate of reason. Knowledge becomes a hot topic heightening and expressing, the intense feelings of the time.

The settling effects of rhythm
The rhythms that will eventually constitute the practices of the University of Paris take a variety of shapes. There are rhythms of teaching (e.g. frequency of meetings, payments, locations), rhythms of exchange with other professions (e.g. scribes, bookmakers, dance masters) as well as rhythmically occurring public events like disputations. These rhythms form, to a large extent, because of critical mass. Compayré (1893) estimates that Abelard’s fame drew 5000 students to Paris – an enormous number for a medieval city. What had, up to then, been arbitrary, ad-hoc arrangements between individual masters and students unavoidably got into contact (and conflict) with each other and started to take on a rhythmic, more predictable nature. They increased in pace and started taking each other into account until they merged into one polyrhythmic arrangement. Not only were these rhythms practical and reassuring, they also very quickly developed, as rhythms are wont to do, a connotation of “Everybody does it”, “This is how it has always been” and “This is the way to do it”. This is what Rao and Kenney (2008) describe as a settlement predating the emergence of an institution. What I would add to their insight is the rhythmic nature of the settlement and the aesthetic quality of the rhythmic arrangement for it is this aesthetic quality that explains why people feel compelled to reproduce these rhythms even before there is a legitimising institution in sight. Nobody negotiates anything here in a classical sense, nobody is aware of a settlement being established; the settled nature originates primarily in the soothing of the rhythm.

*Rhythm and intensity*

These local rhythms interlock with, and support, what I will call the rhythm of invocations. This is the rhythm of occasions at which the university as an institution becomes visible. I follow Thornton (1989) in saying that institutions, in some of their aspects, are not permanently present but are invoked when needed. This invocation is a conscious reference to the institution
and as such stands in contrast to the unreflected repetition of the practices constituting the internal rhythms.

The collation of documents pertaining to the University of Paris (Denifle, 1889) allows us to trace these early invocations. It shows us that before 1200 the University is only referred to as a topic in an exchange between two other parties. In 1200, it becomes, for the first time, the addressee of a document, when the French king grants privileges to the “students” (scholarium) of Paris. In 1221 the University, for the first time, acts as author of an official document. The invocations hence trace a clear progression from object to passive subject to active subject in the course of 58 years. Rhythm, once again, plays an important role in this as it intensifies the presence of the institution. Looking at the dates, we can see that the 35 years from 1163-1198 produced 18 documents in which the University was referred to. The same number of 18 documents is reached in less than half the time, viz. after another 15 years, in 1213, and yet another 15 years later there are an additional 43 documents. With an increasing pace of invocations the university becomes more and more real.

In contrast to this unintended rhythmic consequence, any document of an explicitly constitutional character is not in sight for a long time. It is quite instructive, and supporting my argument, to see that the first written document issued by the University of Paris contains three rules specifying how to dress as a master, the obligation to attend another master’s funeral, and who was allowed to read the morning lectures. Were the people who wrote and read this aware that something new was afoot, that they had abandoned one logic in favour of another? Probably not. This is no founding act, no recognition that something new has started, just a

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2 with the caveat that some documents may not have survived
3 Considering that it was published over 800 years ago we cannot be entirely sure if it is indeed the very first document issued. Judging from later documents, however, failing to make any reference to a proper foundational act, we can safely assume that if earlier documents existed they discussed similarly exotic issues.
codification of existing practices (and probably not the most important ones, at that). They simply wanted masters to attend other masters’ funerals and dress in proper gowns. Over time, however, these funerals and these dresses would be seen again and again and, together with other rhythms, would eventually merge into something recognisable as an institution. And once the institution was recognised, these rhythms would be used consciously to invoke the university in its invocation rhythm and lend it presence and intensity. It is in this framework that the document makes sense as an early document, not in a framework of logics and choice.

**Institutional entrepreneurship?**

Looking at the role of the European powers promoting the new institution, it can be argued, and I have done so in my earlier paper, that the Pope and the French king had an interest in creating the university for a number of reasons. We have, however, seen that there was no direct fiat, no founding act. True, both magnates intervened, once the institution was established, to promote it on several occasions. It strikes me, however, as far more accurate to assume that, as far as the nascent institution was concerned, the Pope and the King, like their modern counterparts, had “a feeling of, and a feeling of if, a feeling of but, and a feeling of by” (James, 1890, p. 246), in other words, a rather vague idea that an institution of this sort, if it existed, might help them to achieve a yet to be formulated x if one could make sure that it did not veer the wrong way. This rather vague idea became more concrete as the institution in its possibilities and problems concretised, but that is not the same as to say that the University of Paris emerged *because* it served the interests of the Pope and the King. There is no neat rational link here, especially if we consider that some interests could only be formulated once the institution had been established, that is, once it had taken a particular shape at one occasion, and on another, and on the next.
The man almost inevitably mentioned in regard to the “founding” of the University of Paris is Peter Abelard. Most historians would agree that he had the most profound influence on the establishment of the new institutions. Yet, Abelard died in 1142; 66 years before the above document was published and 78 years before the University was treated as a legal person. He cannot have been the founder in any meaningful sense of the word. Still, I would agree with these historians and hold that everybody studying Abelard’s life will feel that this is where it all began. This is despite the fact that Abelard did not have a vision, and his leadership record was pitiful. He was regarded the master of rhetorical elegance but he never formulated the idea of a university. What he did, and what modern readers recognise, was to live, write and talk in an arrangement of tensions and valuations that would be mirrored by the new institution. His major work “Sic et Non” (Yes and No) was the first medieval treatise to show inconsistencies in the teaching of the Church Fathers and to establish a truth claim through reasoning. Important for the ritualist perspective, however, is that his influence was not merely intellectual. His life story, made popular by his autobiography (Abelard, 1972), is fraught with the most intense drama, highest ambition, deepest emotion – sex and crime, one may say, at its best. Abelard did not produce a discursive vision or ideal for his followers to implement but prefigured the dynamic form of the university and embodied it at a time when the critical pitch made people search for new expressions of new feelings. He was, in this sense, a truly living form. Like Goethe’s “Werther” propelling his author to international fame overnight and triggering a European suicide wave, like the Beatles in the 1960s, he embodied the experiences of a critical mass of people and became their focal point. As such, and not because of any political-institutional ambitions, did his beliefs and actions have institutional consequences.

Conclusion
Starting from a critique of the cognitivist bias in institutional theory and a demand to recognise the role of values, affects and beauty in institutional processes, I have provided the conceptual basis of a ritualist perspective that allows us to include the Weird Sisters in the analysis of institutions. This enables us to understand what drives institutional actors and to see what happens below the radar of intention, consciousness and rational thought.

Taking the new aspects presented in the case study as an illustration of what can be achieved, I argue that current cognitivist models, in particular the institutional logics perspective, would benefit from integrating a ritualist perspective. This is especially pertinent in two regards.

The first is that a focus on timings, rhythms, intensity, harmony, values and affect allows us to understand the unintended consequences of rational agency, both in the sense of the non-rational prerequisites of that kind of action and in the sense of the non-rational outcomes or effects of that kind of action.

In the case of the university, we can actually see the institution come to life as rhythms of teaching and meeting emerge and link with each other, or as practices as diverse as book-making and tax collecting become part of an overall arrangement. Much of this happens under the radar of consciousness for we can detect no master plan to establish a university – an institution unheard of at the time. What we can trace, however, is how in the absence of such a plan people start to take these arrangements and rhythms for granted, how they provide them with a feeling of security and eventually a feeling that this is “how it is done”. This feeling, in turn, is the basis for then justifying the arrangement as beneficial, reasonable or even rational.
Throughout this process, the university becomes more real with every repetition, every fit and every invocation.

Nothing of that, I would argue, presents itself in a cognitivist approach because this evolution is for the most part based on feeling rather than reason. Such an approach would also struggle to find the requisite reasons and objectives for the rational behaviour it studies. As we have seen in the case study, people start to “behave institutionally” long before there is an institution to prescribe and justify this behaviour.

The same goes for the pivotal role of intensity. The Renaissance of the 12th century is difficult to capture by data collected with a cognitivist approach because essential parts of it find their expression in the literature and arts of the time as well as in emotional statements of contemporary witnesses. Contemporaries’ fascination with Abelard can hardly be overestimated, yet is nothing that survives a critical evaluation of the man. The idea of him prefiguring the institution in an aesthetic manner has no place in a cognitivist explanation, yet it explains why every single historian starts his or her account with a man sixty-five years dead by the time the University of Paris issues its first surviving document. More importantly, the intensity explains what drove people during those sixty-five years to repeat and elaborate what we perceive in hindsight to be the arrangements of the new institution but what they at the time could not yet project as a new, enabling and powerful structure.

The second major tenet of the ritualist perspective is that the human body matters in a categorical manner. Human actors perceive and act guided by values, affects and beauty; other actors, in particular organisations, lack the body to do this. By emphasising the importance of bodily perception and decision-making as well as its distinction from its cognitive counterparts,
the ritualist perspective enables us to explain the driving forces of human agency. It also draws clear analytical lines between human embodied actors, human actors in organisational (i.e. formal-rational⁴) settings, human actors in institutional (i.e. ritualist) settings and organisational actors. As I have shown in the example of Abelard, institutional entrepreneurship should be conceptualised as distinctive from an entrepreneur setting up an organisation, for Abelard did not have to justify his actions by recourse to rational or formal resources – again, he could not have done so because the framework in which his actions could be justified had not been set up yet. Meanwhile, he embodied, and was perceived to embody, certain values, affects and aesthetic arrangements, such as the relentless pursuit of knowledge, a disdain for any authority other than reason or the resolve to communicate knowledge to anyone willing to engage.

**Bringing Institutional Logics Back To Where They Started**

Integrating the Weird Sisters would, paradoxically enough, take institutional logics back from its current point of of all-encompassing proliferation, as exemplified by the definition of Thornton et al. as:

> “socially constructed, historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices, assumptions, values and beliefs by which individuals produce and reproduce the material subsystems, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their daily activity” (P. H. Thornton, et al., 2012, p. 51),

which

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⁴ In my distinction between organisations and institutions in refer to Ahrne et al. (2016).
“a set of material practices and symbolic constructions – which constitutes its organizing principles and which is available to organizations and individuals to elaborate” (Friedland & Alford, 1991, p. 248).

An organizing principle, as Friedland (2009a, 2009b, 2013b, 2017) has elaborated in later publications under the heading of “institutional substance”, is not an abstraction but a principle in the older meaning of the word. This meaning points to an energetic force or generative social mechanism capable of creating and maintaining institutions. It is a principle that drives and constitutes – which takes us back to the two contributions of the ritualist perspective that I have highlighted at the beginning of this paper. Driving and motivating agency as well as providing the prerequisites for the constitution of rationality is what the Weird Sisters do, and in that sense they are organizing principles.

Furthermore, it should be emphasised that the “logics” part of the label has never referred to logic in any strict rational-cognitive sense. Logic in that sense is a relation that holds between propositions, and social life is not propositional. The logics of institutional logics, in contrast, refer to a coherence and consistency between certain practices, assumptions and discourses. A market logic in this sense is a state of affairs where people believe in the value of individual property, and the legal and economic structures are based on this belief. In this, rather weak, sense the term can serve as a heuristic or shorthand. It is then interesting to actually study what produces the coherence/consistency, what type of coherence/consistency it is, and what effects it has on (the agency of) human beings – which are exactly the kind of questions I have outlined above as central to the ritualist perspective.
References


