I wrote a book, *The Changing and Unchanging Face of U.S. Civil Society*, that is based on two questions: (1) Did U.S. civil society change during the twentieth century? and (2) if so, how did it change? My research design was based on “thinking institutionally” about democratic civil society. Consequently, I began with a minimalist model of civil society in the United States and extracted what seemed to be the most important components of this institution, both from Tocqueville's work and from pluralist democratic theory. The resulting five components were voluntary association, diversity of association, communication, autonomy, and mediation. I used this model to discipline a search for empirical data that applied and spoke to change across a lengthy period of time. I tried to be receptive to any kind of detectable change. The result is an empirical description of a particular democratic civil society, that of the United States.

**About Institutions and Institutional Change**

Mary Douglas, in *How Institutions Think*, conceptualizes an institution as a dynamic meld of cognitive and social functions fueled with moral energy. This, I suggest, is a useful way to think of democratic civil society. Institutions automatically do the chores of society while they stabilize society. In these large ways, institutions work for us, enabling us to attend to our individual interests. In essence, institutions are a means for organizing and maintaining a coherent society; for embodying our values, norms, meaning, and identity; for giving direction and purpose to individuals and groups; for giving us the time, energy, and space to create.

Although institutions work automatically, we builders and custodians of institutions have the responsibility of keeping consistency, or a “good fit,” between our ideals and institutions. This requires “intellectual independence.” Such independence entails resistance to the influence of institutions to make them more visible for analysis and to, subsequently, seek new possibilities and choices that might reduce discrepancy or lessen the contradictions that appear. The importance of making institutions visible is illustrated in Samuel Huntington's *American Politics: the Promise of Disharmony*. Huntington illuminates the intransigence of contradictions between American ideals and institutions and stresses the risks if Americans fail “to temper and balance their responses to the IVI gap.”

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The origins of inconsistency between ideals and institutions are several. In general, they spring from imperfections, continual adaptation and adjustment, and limits of institutional controls. In the beginning, we seldom start with the best fit between ideals and institutions. Douglas suggests that the concept of bricolage is useful in understanding how institutions are formed. She says that we work with what we have. We have no other way but to synchronize our thoughts and preferences to some degree as we make big decisions and build institutions. Second, there is no guarantee that a fit between ideals and institutions, however good, will remain good. In the context of a dynamic society, we learn, we experience, and we make new institutions. This shapes who we are as individuals and what institutions must do for us. Of course, when new kinds of people develop, says Douglas, further adjustments to institutions become necessary. Third, institutions cannot help but to incorporate, in some manner, the major transformations that occur outside of their own boundaries.

Even with heightened awareness and "intellectual independence," institutional transformation is difficult to engineer and almost impossible to steer. Much of institutional change is continuous and gradual—an adaptive interaction of mankind with the environment. March and Olsen note that this adaptation process is nudged by exploiting the weakness and incompleteness of an institution. And sometimes institutional change is drastic or relatively abrupt, ending in major social structural change. Technology may be behind this type of change, per the example of the effect of the automobile on the way in which associational life is conducted. The locus of association activity, its flavor, and its reach shifted away from the parlor and the front porch with the automobile. Another obvious example of drastic change is what happened in Levittown after people uprooted themselves to move into a planned community, which was initially inhabited from 1958 to 1960. The move to this new suburban locale distanced the residents from the relatives and family with whom they had habitually interacted. Now, Levittowners socialized most with neighbors (33 percent), people they met in organizations (24 percent), and people they met in church (13 percent). Compared to the amount of visiting with neighbors in their previous home, 50 percent said they did more of it in Levittown and 25 percent did just as much visiting with neighbors as before.

One sort of adjustment appears as an alternation between aggregative and integrative processes, i.e., between loosening and innovation and tightening and attention to normative controls. March and Olsen suggest this is "cyclic," with each process presenting problems that lead back to the other. Or one might think of this as a balancing act that helps to sustain tension between diverse elements, keeping our institutions relevant. William G. McLoughlin has made another such change process highly visible as it affects American society in the form of great awakenings in which a people realign and revitalize their institutions. We also must remember that institutional change occurs in different parts of a system at different rates. Furthermore, the adaptation process is often "sticky," or lags behind the phenomena to which it responds. Imagine these kinds of transformation occurring simultaneously, as part of a dynamic meld of social, cognitive, and moral forces, and you will have a sense of my glimpses into American civil society.

The vibrancy of institutions and the complexity of institutional change is analogous to the iceberg, of which we see only the tip—which is also true of democratic civil society. Institutions absorb, adjust to, shape, and resist transformation. Institutions also affirm and uphold the status quo. They store memory, supply cohesion, furnish continuity across generations, demand loyalty and commitment, shape behavior, and constrain our thinking and actions. At the same time, institutions free up our time and energy, give us space to create, permit us to freely improve and express ourselves, and allow us to determine the "good fit."