

Seminar

University of Bremen

Fall 2025

Foundations of Institutional Theory (08-29-W-30)

Dr. Timur Ergen

Institute Labor and Economy (*iaw*)

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Office hours by appointment via email

Meets Mondays at 4 pm in UNICOM 3.3390 (SOCIUM – Mary-Somerville-Str. 3).

Course Description

Theories of institutions have been at the core of the social and behavioral sciences throughout the 20th and early 21st century. The course introduces theories of institutions from across the social sciences. The material covered ranges from institutional theory's classical origins through to recent debates about the explanation of institutional change. Among the main problems discussed are the relationship between social action and institutions, the origins of social order and change, the role of culture and norms in social organization, and the interplay between social power and institutions. While the course delves deeply into theoretical debates, students are encouraged to link theoretical positions to their ongoing empirical research. Corresponding to the field of institutional theory, the course is paradigmatically eclectic. It covers positions from a broad variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives, among them classical anthropology, institutional economics, historical political science, and organizational sociology.

Participation in the seminar

Discussion of the readings will make up the core of the seminar sessions. Students are expected to read all assigned texts and to participate regularly and actively. To get credit (6 CP), students must (1) do all assigned readings; (2) prepare three reading reports (1,500 words); (3) and submit final papers (10,000 characters).

The reading reports are intended to prepare the ground for discussions by asking participants to set out their responses to the readings in written form. Memos should not just summarize the readings, but rather take up specific arguments, compare the positions of different authors, raise questions of evidence, usefulness, or plausibility or draw attention to particular strengths and weaknesses in the arguments and descriptions. We will share these memos through email. In order for everyone to have time to read over the comments of others, these will be due by 4 pm on the day before the class meets. For the final paper, original research on literature, data, or archival material is required. Term papers have to be written in English. All texts are made available on the Stud.IP website of the course.

For organizational matters please contact Timur Ergen (trgn@uni-bremen.de).

Readings

October 13, 2025

Introduction

Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl, 2009. What is Theory? In: Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl, *Social Theory: Twenty Introductory Lectures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1–19.

Peter A. Hall and Rosemary Taylor, 1996. Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms. *Political Studies* 44, 936–957.

October 20, 2025

Durkheim

Émile Durkheim, 1966 [1893]. *The Division of Labor in Society*. New York: The Free Press, 200–225.

Émile Durkheim, 1982 [1895]. *The Rules of Sociological Method*. New York: The Free Press, 50–59.

Émile Durkheim, 2001 [1912]: *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 153–182.

October 27, 2025

The American Tradition

Thorstein Veblen, 1967 [1899]. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Penguin, 1–67; 167–187.

November 3, 2025

The Anthropological Tradition

Bronislaw Malinowski, 1944. *A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 43–119.

November 10, 2025

The Structural-Functionalist Approach

Talcott Parsons, 1951. *The Social System*. New York: The Free Press, 24–67; 428–479.

November 17, 2025

The Sociology-of-Knowledge Approach

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, 1967. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Anchor Books, 47–92.

November 24, 2025

Sociological Neo-Institutionalism I

John Meyer and Brian Rowan, 1977: Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology* 83, 340–363.

December 1, 2025

Sociological Neo-Institutionalism II

Paul DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, 1983. The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields. *American Sociological Review* 48, 147–160.

Paul DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, 1991. *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1–38.

December 8, 2025

Economic Neo-Institutionalism

Douglass North, 1990. Institutions and their Consequences for Economic Performance. In: Karen Cook and Margaret Levi (eds.), *The Limits of Rationality*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 383–401.

Kenneth A. Shepsle, 1989. Studying Institutions: Some Lessons from the Rational Choice Approach. *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 1, 131–147.

December 15, 2025

Institutions and Actors

James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, 1989. *Rediscovering Institutions. The Organizational Basis of Politics*. New York: The Free Press, 21–38; 159–172.

Winter Break: December 22, 2025 - January 2, 2026

January 6, 2026

Historical Institutionalism

Paul Pierson and Theda Skocpol, 2002. Historical Institutionalism in Contemporary Political Science: In: Ira Katznelson and Helen Milner (eds.), *Political Science: The State of the Discipline*. New York: Norton and Company, 693–721.

James Mahoney, 2000. Path Dependence in Historical Sociology. *Theory and Society* 29, 507–548.

January 13, 2026

Institutional Change I

Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen, 2005. Introduction. In: Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen (eds.), *Beyond Continuity: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1–39.

January 20, 2026

Institutional Change II

John F. Padgett and Walter W. Powell, 2012. *The Emergence of Organizations and Markets*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1–29.

January 27, 2026

Final Discussion