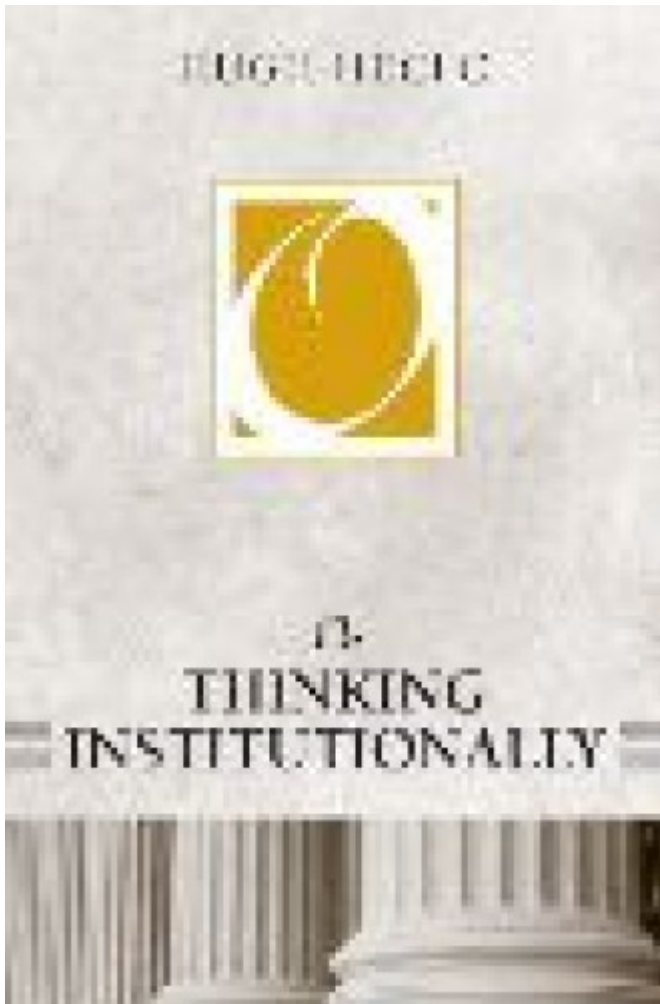


On Thinking Institutionally

reviewed by [Wm. Michael Jinkins](#) in the [December 1, 2009](#) issue

In Review



On Thinking Institutionally

Hugh Hecl

Paradigm

To champion institutions, institutional values and institutional thinking may seem like the ultimate fool's errand, and *On Thinking Institutionally* may be the dullest title

you've ever come across, but Hugh Heclo's analysis of U.S. culture is powerful and prophetic—as powerful and prophetic as Christopher Lasch's classic *The Culture of Narcissism*, Robert Bellah and colleagues' *Habits of the Heart* and Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*.

Heclo, a professor of public affairs at George Mason University and previously a professor of government at Harvard University, chronicles the ways in which cynicism has eroded “social trust and institutional values.” He describes how news organizations have become “more invested in entertainment and celebrity reporters than in researching worthwhile news stories”; businesses have chased “a short-term bottom line at the expense of their employees and the long-term health of their companies”; professional athletes boast and strut, having inducted themselves into “their own private hall of fame” while neglecting to “respect the game”; politicians “blithely mortgage our financial and environmental future” while “citizens generally go along with such fiduciary malfeasance” as long as they are told what they want to hear; and universities have subordinated “their long-term educational mission to immediate demands of the economic marketplace and student consumers.”

As institutional leaders misbehave and all sorts of institutions fail, it is easy to see why distrust of institutions is so common. We would like to get away from institutions, but we can't. We are fundamentally dependent upon them. “Like a disgruntled teenager, we are not quite willing to run away from home, but there is no mistaking the sullen malcontent in the house,” Heclo writes.

Few have done a better job than Heclo of demonstrating why we have become skeptical about institutions. A remarkable phrase-maker, he writes with astonishing clarity and style, and he draws on historical as well as contemporary examples. His reflections on George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison are as lively as his examples from today's newspapers. Heclo recognizes the hope that lies hidden in our disappointment and points to the steps we must take to reclaim the place of institutions as stewards of humanity and human civilization.

Heclo helps us understand not only what it means to think about institutions and their social importance, but also how to think and act institutionally—that is, how to be institutionally minded. He provides the most evocative illustration of this idea in his opening chapter, in which he tells the story of Barry and Cal, two excellent athletes who want to win. Barry is all flash, self-obsessed and eager to draw attention to his performance, while Cal believes that his “ultimate obligation” is to

the game.

Barry and Cal hold very different conceptions of the game. “For Barry the game is a setting in which his athletic prowess is exercised and his accomplishments are recorded. For Cal, the game is that whole rich tradition of people and events that defines his appropriate performance. Where Barry sees a set of rules, Cal sees an ethos.” The difference between them, Hecllo writes, “is what they love about what they are doing. For Barry it is the love of his own sports accomplishments. For Cal, it is a matter of loving the game itself.” Cal exhibits “respect-in-depth,” honoring “something through your own appropriate participation in its practice.” To think institutionally is to think through the roles we play for the common good.

The game in the story of Barry and Cal is shorthand for any institution we inhabit, whether marriage, parenthood, the church, journalism, the military, education or politics. Hecllo believes that Aristotle had it right when he lavished praise on “the person who exercises virtues that sustain excellence in some social practice.” Such a person is as savvy as anyone about the flaws of institutions, but is devoted to institutions’ preservation and improvement because they re-inforce the fabric of our shared existence. Hecllo characterizes an appropriate attitude toward institutions as the capacity to “distrust but value.”

Hecllo’s argument has significant implications for the institutional aspects of the church. Each time I lecture on Avery Dulles’s *Models of the Church*, my students agree that “the church as institution” is theologically and morally the least interesting model. Some Protestant thinkers, like Emil Brunner and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, have dismissed the institutional church altogether, Brunner going so far as to say that the church “as the Body of Christ . . . has nothing to do with an organization and has nothing of the character of the institution about it.” But if the history of the church has taught us anything, it is the institutional church’s gift of endurance, an endurance that makes innovation possible while the apostolic tradition is passed from one generation to the next. It is the Johannine communities, not the Petrine, that have a hard time enduring past the natural lives of their founders.

Hecllo also helps us to understand why so many people call themselves spiritual but not religious. Clearly this designation has something to do with their resistance to being associated with organized religion. Hecllo’s analysis shows us that this is not so much a religious phenomenon as it is an expression of a broadly held suspicion of

virtually all of society's major institutions.

The high level of emotional reactivity and anxiety in our culture is fertile ground for anti-institutionalism, which fosters the very real danger of social disintegration. Those who are in leadership must work hard not to demean the institutions they serve for short-term political or economic gain or out of frustration at their relative ineffectiveness. We are under a sacred obligation to steward our institutions so participants understand their values and their value—so people understand what our institutions can provide that nothing else can.

As for those of us who are not leaders, Heclo asserts that when we participate in meaningful social activities, whether they be in education or politics or the faith practices of our congregations, we become conscious of the fact that what we *should* want makes a deep claim on what we *do* want, drawing us into obligations that hold our desires in check so that in our social connections we are more than we would be individually.