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Comment on Melissa Wilde/4

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Although quite distant from the author's domain of inquiry (sociology of religion and of religious change), or – partly – just for this reason, I found this paper by Melissa Wilde of particular interest. Generally speaking, the issue in itself – what really happened at the Second Vatican Council? – is no doubt original and worth tackling through sociological eyes, given the impact of this event on the unfolding of subsequent key socio-cultural changes.

Taken as a whole, the chapter is also relevant from the standpoint of organisation analysis, which, besides offering a tool to which the author resorts in supporting her argument, constitutes my own main field of research. In this respect, the proposed framework deserves theoretical merit for two main reasons.

Firstly, it is in line with an expanded view of organisation studies, the time for which – it might be added – has definitely come. This perspective argues for the need to go beyond traditional approaches of conceptualising organisation analysis either as a separate and specialised discipline (with its self-contained problematic, theoretical structures and object of study, i.e. formal organisations) or as an interdisciplinary science of organisations (integrating the contributions to the understanding of organisational phenomena that originated in various research domains such as sociology, psychology, cultural anthropology and suchlike). More holistically, and stimulated by the growing appreciation of how the fabric of social life and practices reweaves around the warp of organisations' behaviour and micro/macro organising activities [Perrow 1991; Stern and Barley 1996; Weick 1979], the expanded view suggests that organisation theory may work as a sort of "dispersed" sensibility, providing scholars with categories and insights that are useful for addressing specific areas of social ac-

tion (from market to politics and the State, from education to scientific research itself, etc.). In my opinion, even regardless of her awareness of this point, Wilde's account of the organisational strategies underlying the bishops' conducts at the Council can be considered an exemplary expression of the above cited stance.

Secondly, by relating the outcomes of peculiar historical circumstances to the mechanisms of collective action that can be grasped in the vein of organisational analysis, the paper is in close correspondence with the emphasis that has been placed in the last decade on the need to bring history back in, given the notoriously a-historical attitude of mainstream organisation studies [e.g. Kieser 1994; Rowlinson and Procter 1999; Üsdiken and Kieser 2004]. Thus, also in this respect Wilde (consciously or not) offers a contribution that is rich in heuristic potential for organisation theorists willing to adopt a reflexive perspective on their knowledge practices, to engage in a conversation with other "genres" of discourse, or to rethink their skills.

Alongside the observations just outlined, Wilde's contribution is valuable on the basis of other, more substantial reasons. As stated above, the issue at stake – social factors underlying critical choices at the Second Vatican Council – is intriguing. The methods of data collection and analysis appear to be both suited to the goals (and constraints) of study and performed appropriately. The most convincing aspect of the text, however, lies exactly in what appears to be the heart of its explanation:

a) the claim that, while shedding light on the role of religious pluralism and competition in determining religious leaders' orientation towards change, Supply-Side theory fails to offer adequate conceptual tools for the understanding of the possible routes that change may take according to distinctive contextual conditions and local rationalities (cf. the interests and criteria for prioritisation among the four groups of Catholic bishops, as emerging within conservative monopolies, progressive non-monopolistic free countries, progressive monopolies in crisis and progressive missionary countries);

b) the consequent argument that the decisions of religious leaders at the Council, particularly in terms of their openness to different types of reform, could be more generally – and subtly – conceived as organisational strategies enacted in order to minimise uncertainty (or to maintain stability) in "situated" institutional fields, rather than as mere marketing strategies aimed at keeping current members and attracting potential followers.

Taking these as the core insights of the author's interpretation, we are provided with a picture which is congenial to the pursuit of complex theories of social action. Such a framework succeeds in highlighting the limitations of more rationalistic explanations of individual and social group preferences and choices, that is, an approach the flavour of which is not absent within the paradigm of Supply-Side theory.

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The latter, in fact, identifies religious economy as an institutional space underpinned by functional mechanisms – e.g. market competition – "forcing suppliers to be more responsive and efficient" (in the words of two Supply-Side theorists quoted in the paper). Quite differently, Wilde's analysis suggests that actors' options and related behaviours cannot be properly grasped outside the socio-cultural and historical frame in which they are embedded. In this view, people in different institutional domains (here, the various groups of bishops) develop and hold different assumptions and expectations about their interests and preferences. Socio-cultural environments are subtle in their influence, because they shape the criteria through which actors "discover" and enact their options: faced with the novelty of the reforms debated at the Council, the communities of bishops react by deriving the lenses to make sense of it from their distinctive institutional contexts.

In order to take this interpretative step, as openly acknowledged in the paper, the author draws on a stream of research identified with institutional (or, better, neo-institutional) theory in organisation studies and economic sociology. This elucidation is of pivotal importance, since the term *institutionalism* has diverse meanings in different disciplines. On the one hand, the form of institutionalism most closely associated with economics and political science mainly regards institutional practices and arrangements (coalition structures, governing rules, standards of behaviour, etc.) as products of purposive design enacted by instrumentally oriented individuals. On the other hand, in organisation analysis and economic sociology institutionalism treats the same objects as a result of human action, however not necessarily as outcomes of rational and conscious design. Thus, the latter approaches imply a rejection of rational-actor models and are consonant with a more encompassing and process-oriented view of social reality, focusing on how interests are constituted and emerge within particular contexts of collective life. Indeed, from this standpoint, Supply-Side theory is institutional but it is also reminiscent of functional and restrictive explanations of institutional arrangements in that it merely and straightforwardly relates them to religious i) regulation, ii) pluralism, and iii) market share in a given institutional context. By contrast, Wilde's representation leaves space for ambiguity and contradiction in the way that institutionally originated options serve as pathways for decision making and action organising, as displayed, for instance, in her nuanced account of the multifaceted attitudes towards reforms of the bishops from Northern Europe and Latin America.

Curiously enough, Wilde's adoption of the institutional model may just be taken as a starting point for some critical remarks, which – as a whole – I would sum up as follows: although the central ideas underlying the paper are strongly persuasive, it ultimately delivers less than it promises.

My first contention here is that something relevant has been lost (or down-played) in the author's translation of sociological and organisational institutionalism. Her analysis operates predominantly at two levels: *a*) it focuses on entire inter-organisational fields, i.e. national or supranational networks of interacting church organisations; *b*) it emphasises the impact of interests and power (e.g. church struggles and negotiations) in shaping the development of these fields and of actors' strategies within them. Both factors are simply crucial for the understanding of "legitimacy concerns at the heart of most organisational processes". What this portrayal seems to lack, however, is a focus on the distinctive role of culture and symbolic elements in shaping organisational reality, interactions between organisations and, hence, institutional order in a field. In a nutshell, norms, values, beliefs, taken-for-granted routines and categorisations constitute the essential cognitive and moral frames of reference out of which choices are made and decisions arise (e.g. by attention focusing). The author does allude to the link between organisations' viability (or success) and their consistency (primarily in terms of structure and practices) with the symbolic environment provided by an institutional field. Unfortunately, however, she does not delve into the issue.

It is not going too far to assume that this neglect is, in no small measure, due to the fact that Wilde adopts the institutional perspective basically by resorting to DiMaggio and Powell's classical article on institutional isomorphism and to Fligstein's socio-political analysis of markets. For sure, such references form unavoidable premises for an institutional recasting of organisational action. DiMaggio and Powell's insistence on mimetic isomorphism mechanisms, for instance, allows the author to offer a plausible explanation of how Latin American bishops cope with uncertainty by seeking guidance from the experience of other religious organisations in the same situation. As for Fligstein's approach, it goes without saying that the two aspects – cultural frames defining appropriate ends and means, and politics – are not unconnected in determining institutional logics which both impose constraints and provide the actors involved with resources, enabling them to select strategies in the pursuit of their interests. Nonetheless, I suspect that the paper would substantially benefit from drawing on more culturally oriented versions of institutional theory, with their specific insights regarding the strictly symbolic sources of practical action within inter-organisational fields as well as the social processes leading to their formation, reproduction and evolution. To cite some, this is the case of works like the ones by Scott [1995], Scott and Meyer [1994] and Zucker [1988].

A second observation that might be made goes back to one central idea that the proposed framework revolves around, i.e. using organisation analysis as a key to the understanding of religious institutions and change. Once the advantages of this type

of fertilisation have been recognised, why not let the organisational view develop its full potential? Alongside the meaningful contribution of the institutional approach, other, more recent streams of organisational theory could prove suitable to expand the "universe of discourse" of sociology of religion, allowing scholars in the field to shed light on important (or unexpected) themes in their domain of research (starting, for sure, from the topics at the heart of Wilde's paper: collective identities, processes of social reproduction and change, etc.).

To begin with, and to limit oneself to the culture issue mentioned above, fruitful indications and directions of analysis might stem from current work on learning and "sense-making" activities in organisations [e.g. Cook and Yanow 1993; Weick 1995] and "communities of practice" [e.g. Nicolini *et al.* 2003; Wenger 1998]. Turning to such streams of literature, the research interests and agendas of which frequently tend to overlap, would probably help to grasp more about the workings of cultural systems – sets of values and beliefs, but also the artefacts of their expression and transmission (language, action routines, etc.) – in the practices of situated groups, as well as the many ways in which these underlie the construction of social identities, the production of shared knowledge and innovation itself. Incidentally, I cannot avoid recognising an inherent difficulty in the possible attempt to build some bridges between the micro-level based theory of action entailed by those perspectives and Wilde's framework, which rests on the macro side of organisational institutionalism (and, indeed, most institutionalists propend for a focus on macro level mechanisms and effects within inter-organisational fields). Any macro account of social reality, however, is more or less explicitly underpinned by a micro sociology – or, if we prefer, by a "social psychology" – and bringing this to light could be a worthwhile effort in order to lead to an enhanced appreciation of a particular macro theory. Thus, I would suggest (and apart from what will be the final structure of this paper), the author might consider cultivating a more detailed attention to the elements mentioned above in the further development of her interesting work on religious change.

Finally, my contention that the paper delivers less than it promises is justified by the impression that the ambitious "mission statement" both expressed in the title and recalled here and there in the paper – i.e. "Toward a *general theory* of religious change" – is somewhat exceeding in the light of its very content. As said, the study that the author has carried out deals with a pivotal turning point in the evolution of Catholicism and of its relationships with other Christian Churches, painting a picture that is rich in convincing features. We may also expect that, in general, the adoption of institutional categories is likely to modify some usual conceptions of other religious transitions. It is reasonable to wonder, though, whether this instructive contribution lends support to the type of claims implied by the reference to a general

model without being integrated into a richer body of research. I may be wrong, but I guess that the problem is partly linked to the derivative nature of the paper, which is an excerpt from a book manuscript. This does not exclude that in the book we might find further material (e.g. examples, connections and comparisons) which the paper glosses over; if so, it would be helpful to have some hints in the paper as well.

The shift from the book manuscript to the paper format has probably a more direct influence on the fact that, in the final sections, the structure of the chapter looks somewhat confusing (or unfinished): the ample digression on the Ecumenical Movement is certainly essential to the understanding of organisational cooperation with competitors within stable religious fields such as progressive North America and Northern Europe; the point is that this (however necessary) elucidation tends to intertwine and intermingle with the paper's concluding remarks, at the expense of clarity. In other words, what I feel to be lacking is a "conventional" final discussion or overview recapitulating the key tenets of the framework, dwelling upon its implications and limitations and identifying possible lines of inquiry and reflection for future research. Giving more order and precision to the conclusions would probably help strengthen the overall analysis.

As a result, I think that Wilde's proposal is work in progress, but of a kind that is definitely worth being sympathetic to.

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Who Wanted What and Why at the Second Vatican Council?

Toward a General Theory of Religious Change

Abstract: This paper explores the differences among the four groups of bishops who participated at the Second Vatican Council, with the goal of answering a simple, but key, sociological question about the Council: who wanted what, and why? In brief, I argue that in order to understand, explain and ideally even predict, the perspectives, interests and goals, or what I call organizational strategies, of religious leaders, sociologists of religion must broaden their understandings of the factors that affect them. Though Supply-Side theory recognises that the presence of other religious institutions (i.e. religious pluralism) has powerful effects on religious leaders, I argue that in order to predict not only whether religious leaders will be open to reform, but also what reforms they will prioritise, we must consider not only the presence of other institutions in a society, but the relationship between those organisations, especially whether those relationships are stable. This is the case because in stable fields, legitimacy concerns trump concerns about efficiency and growth.