

CONFERENCE REPORT
RONALD COASE INSTITUTE WORKSHOP ON INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS 16 – 21/9/06
INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY OF NEW INSTITUTIONAL ECONOMICS CONFERENCE 22 –
24/9/06
THINKING AND DOING CONFERENCE 25 – 26/9/06
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This report details three linked events held in Boulder Colorado in September 2006. All related to the subject of New Institutional Economics (NIE) and brought together a mix of economists, lawyers, political scientists and others to discuss issues related to this interdisciplinary subject. Despite the similar subject matter each event had a very different spirit, and each will be discussed separately.[1]

[Ronald Coase Institute Workshop on Institutional Analysis](#)

This workshop was a superlative experience, which makes it difficult to describe. Twenty workshop students from around the world participated. We were a diverse group of economists, lawyers and social scientists. Most workshop students were PhD research students or had recently graduated. The workshop faculty, who had all donated their time and self-funded their participation, were outstanding. They included Nobel Laureate in Economics Douglass North. Other faculty members were a balance of “big names” or long established leaders in the field of NIE and younger faculty members who are up-and-coming names in the field of NIE.[2]

I had expected the workshop to involve lectures on what NIE is, combined with presentation of the projects we had submitted and on which we were selected to attend. Instead, much of the workshop was somewhat like a very intensive high caliber graduate school. Having been given lectures on how to present our ideas and ourselves to the wider NIE audience we were then divided into small groups to work with faculty members. In these small groups our ideas were extensively critiqued and stripped down, and we were then given ideas on how to rebuild our projects so that they would be more focused and interesting. We then had time to consult with individual faculty for further feedback. Having gone through this process we all then presented to the wider group and received further feedback from one faculty discussant, one student discussant and the group as a whole. Whilst this process was very challenging it was also intensely rewarding. As well as relearning things about clarity which I had forgotten to apply to my own work, I also learned a lot of new things about how to market and target my research – issues which are increasingly important in this age of information overload.

The ideas of NIE also come out through the workshop, but they were revealed much more subtly than through lectures which described NIE. The process of gradual revelation through examining what made particular presentations valuable and connected to NIE helped me to appreciate the breadth and depth of the field, and to realize that there is no monolithic NIE method that can be applied to make research “good”.

The interdisciplinary nature of NIE was also emphasised through the process of developing our projects. Having been critiqued, there was a lot of inter-student support to reformulate project presentations. This

usually came from people from other fields who were generous in taking time to help and try to understand fields which they did not have any prior experience – or maybe interest - in. This spirit of collaboration and cooperation was strengthened by the discussant process, as names were randomly selected rather than being matched on the basis of prior interest. The workshop structure, and particularly the discussant process, made me break out of my own narrow sphere of interest and open both my eyes and my mind to other topics and disciplines.

The collegial atmosphere of the workshop was also fostered by the accessibility of the Faculty. During breaks Faculty and students mingled freely. Each evening we were taken out to dinner and again Faculty did not hold themselves remote from the students. This was another very special feature of the workshop. To non-economists there is, no doubt, something comical about everyone clustering around the famous faculty members for photographs, but to be able to speak with them was an immense privilege. I am very grateful to have been privileged to take part in this challenging and enriching workshop.

[10th Annual Conference of the International Society for New Institutional Economics \(ISNIE\)](#)

Having been challenged and extended by the Ronald Coase Institute I could then sit back and enjoy the ISNIE conference. This conference was structured as a traditional academic conference with a number of concurrent sessions running throughout each day. Within each session between three and five papers were presented. Discussants were assigned to each paper adding further depth to each paper. As usual when there are concurrent sessions a number of difficult decisions had to be made. I tended to follow the sessions that were more focused on law and development, and on issues relating to developing countries. This was not always an easy choice, as there were several panels organized by political scientists (rather than lawyers or economists) which would also have been very relevant to my personal interest in issues relating to the development of stable democracies. The range of topics and their interest to legal academics is, I think, an important indicator of the interdisciplinary nature of NIE. Lawyers interested in subjects as diverse as land law, intellectual property, trade law, legal history, natural resources law and corporations would also have found specific sessions relating to their particular interest.

Two plenary sessions also ran. The first plenary speech was delivered by Douglass North. He expanded on some of the matters that had been discussed at the Ronald Coase Institute. His speech, entitled ‘The Natural State: or why economic development is so difficult to achieve’ again highlighted the need to acknowledge that the process of change is culturally conditioned and so will be different in each situation. North also participated in sessions as a discussant and audience member. His humble and down-to-earth insightfulness serve as an inspiration. The second plenary, delivered by Benito Arrunada discussed ‘Manufacturing Property Rights’. This speech would be of particular interest to lawyers interested in the comparative analysis of property law systems. This speech also reminded us of the need to look beyond the formal institutions (or state laws) in order to understand how laws are actually implemented and what impact they have.

[Thinking and Doing Conference](#)

The final conference in this group of events was the First International Thinking and Doing Conference. This organization is led by a Ronald Coase Institute graduate and aims to bring together young researchers who are looking at broad issues relating to law, economics and policy. Peer support and discussion and feedback to improve each others work was a major aim of this conference. This was achieved through a process in which a limited number of written papers were selected for presentation. Two discussants were assigned to each paper and considerable time was allowed for further discussion and questions by the group. This process ensured that all papers received a generous amount of feedback.

As only 16 papers were presented the conference was not split into concurrent sessions, thereby avoiding

the dilemma of choosing which session to attend. This also helped to foster a group spirit. This, combined with the relative youth of most presenters and discussants, helped to ensure that the conference was a more light hearted affair than the larger ISNIE conference.

As with the other conferences one of the major benefits was the cross fertilization of ideas from other disciplines. Whilst it was difficult for me to understand some of the papers that were grounded in econometrics there were a group of papers that were particularly related to my interest in legal pluralism and which deserve particular mention. Angela Stanton's paper titled 'A model for trust and reciprocity' was grounded in the new field of neuro-economics. Whilst her research approach is very different to that used by lawyers, the basic question of how social context trust (or trust within interpersonal relationships) is established and how this influences individuals behaviours is very relevant to questions of the extent to which individuals use law to order interpersonal relationships. Marina Dodlova's paper titled 'Gift-exchange in sustaining bureaucracies' explored similar issues, although from a different theoretical perspective and may also help lawyers to understand how interpersonal relationships may undermine or alter the rules laid down by the formal legal system. Finally Arina Matvejeva's paper titled 'Patent Rights Index in Countries in Transition' built up a model for indexing formal laws relating to patents in different countries. This approach could be used for comparing formal laws across countries in a number of areas. At the University of the South Pacific, where our examination of the formal laws is necessarily comparative, this analytical tool could be particularly helpful.

CONCLUSION

Attending all three events was somewhat like running a marathon and by the end of the Thinking and Doing Conference the group of people who had started at the Ronald Coase Institute and attended all three events were somewhat overloaded. However, the opportunity to listen to and work with such a large group of outstanding scholars does not come along often, and nor does the opportunity to have your own work thoroughly critiqued. I came away from these events enthused by the possibilities offered by NIE as a discipline and with a list of future research projects. In 2007 the Ronald Coase Institute Workshop on Institutional Analysis, and the 11th Annual ISNIE Conference and the 2nd Thinking and Doing Conference will be held from June 16 - 25 in Reykjavik, Iceland. Researchers looking for interdisciplinary approaches for understanding the interaction between law, society and development in the Pacific should find real value in these events.

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[1] Links to websites, which provide papers and other information about each event, have been included (click on headings). If there is further information I can provide my email is Jowitt_a@vanuatu.usp.ac.fj.

[2] The full list of faculty were Alexandra Benham, Lee Benham, Sebastián Galiani, Scott Gehlbach, Philip Keefer, Zeny Kranzer, Gary Libecap, Claude Ménard, Henry Mohrman, Douglass North, John Nye, Mary Shirley, Alberto Simpser, Oliver Williamson, and Decio Zylbersztajn.