

John W. Meyer, laudation

John Meyer was trained as a sociologist and as a professor of sociology he taught and conducted research at Stanford University for 35 years. In 2001, he became professor emeritus.

Staying at the same university for more than three decades is really remarkable. It might appear somewhat inflexible according to modern "standards" of individual mobility. However, John Meyer's continuing stay at Stanford University finds its expression in the huge research program which he developed from the 1960s onwards. This program proved to be thought provoking since its inception and it has not lost anything of its attraction in the early 21st century.

Hence, what are the characteristic features of his research approach? To put it in a nutshell, it is the unique combination of a radical culturalism on the one hand and an analytical rigour with respect to empirically advanced research strategies on the other. Already in the 1970s, John Meyer invented the idea and concept of a world culture. Guiding thesis is that we better understand the world if we think of it as-based on norms, values, and ideals of rationality and fairness.

John Meyer's approach and research emphasize social change and the cultural foundation of any social relations. In this respect, we can easily identify the heritage of two founding fathers of sociology, that of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. Taking the perspective to heart that societies to a large extent depend on cultural principles of modernity such as rationality and modern actorhood social change appears to be less open und less flexible than usually assumed and proposed. Said differently: a lot more of social change and development is predictable as these are based on a few specific modern norms and ideals.

A foremost contribution of John Meyer's life long study is to illustrate the broad Weberian concept of rationalization based on empirical data. Rationalization, here, implies a broad world view, characterised by an emphasis on causality, i.e. a clear relation of means and ends; as well, secondly, a concept of individuals, organizations, and states understood as self-controlled actors with preferences and strategies along the ideals of rationality and fairness.

John Meyer convincingly has shown that the impact of this cultural foundation is to be found in a broad range of political issues - e.g. with regard to climate change, migration policy, population control and demography. It also is to be found with regard to most organizational reforms – i.e. in economy, public administration and education. Finally and possibly rather surprisingly, we find the same trend of rationalization also when it comes to modern individualized life styles – i.e. with respect to health issues, family planning and the engineering of work/life-balances.

John Meyer's scientific productivity has produced more than 200 articles, published in the highest ranked scientific journals. There are also lots of edited books and monographs - many of them having become standard books in seminars and in university libraries all over the world. As a consequence, John Meyer's impact on contemporary sociology is outstanding. He is one among the most prestigious scholars in social theory. And, it should be stressed, he has also a top reputation in a broad range of other academic disciplines such as political sciences, economy, science studies, and many more.

As our faculty aims to relate these academic fields to each other and to strengthen a closer cooperation, the contribution of John Meyer serves as an outstanding frame of reference and inspiration.