



The Archaeology of Institutional Life

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Institutions pervade social life. They express community goals and values by defining the limits of socially acceptable behavior. Institutions are often vested with the resources, authority, and power to enforce the orthodoxy of their time. But institutions are also arenas in which both orthodoxies and authority can be contested. Between power and opposition lies the individual experience of the institutionalized. Whether in a boarding school, hospital, prison, almshouse, commune, or asylum, their experiences can reflect the positive impact of an institution or its greatest failings. This interplay of orthodoxy, authority, opposition, and individual experience are all expressed in the materiality of institutions and are eminently subject to archaeological investigation.

A few archaeological and historical publications, in widely scattered venues, have examined individual institutional sites. Each work focused on the development of a specific establishment within its narrowly defined historical context; e.g., a fort and its role in a particular war, a schoolhouse viewed in terms of the educational history of its region, an asylum or prison seen as an expression of the prevailing attitudes toward the mentally ill and sociopaths. In contrast, this volume brings together twelve contributors whose research on a broad range of social institutions taken in tandem now illuminates the experience of these institutions. Rather than a culmination of research on institutions, it is a landmark work that will instigate vigorous and wide-ranging discussions on institutions in Western life, and the power of material culture to both enforce and negate cultural norms.

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