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JOÃO DE PINA-CABRAL

# Afterword:
# What is an institution?

What is an institution? We successively examine definitions provided by Durkheim, Mauss, Parsons, Goffman and Berger, and Luckman. Whilst anthropologists acknowledge that the stuff of human institutions is 'the combination of modes of action with modes of thinking', somehow they have seen the epitome of that embodied in the compulsory organisations of modern, state-run, Western society. The paper argues for the abandonment of representational solutions, which operate with a Cartesian view of mind; sociocentric solutions, which view groupness as unitary and teleological; and individualist solutions that fail to see people as constituted in ontogeny through intersubjective attunement. Human sociality and human understanding must not be separated from the world, but persons do not pre-exist intersubjective attunement and this operates through a process of triangulation between self, other and world where all elements are intrinsically involved.

**Key words** institution, representation, sociocentrism, individualism, intersubjectivity

## Introduction

Over a century ago, Sir James Frazer presented a conference at an evening meeting of the Royal Institution of London called *Psyche's Task* (1909). His argument was simple:

> While the institutions with which I shall deal have all survived into civilised society and can no doubt be defended by solid and weighty arguments, it is practically certain that among savages, and even among peoples that have reason above the level of savagery, these very same institutions have derived much of their strength from beliefs which nowadays we should condemn unreservedly as superstitious and absurd. (1909: 2)

He chooses to focus on four institutions – *government*, *private property*, *marriage* and *respect for human life* – and, at the end of the essay, he tells us that this choice is based on his conviction that these institutions 'are the pillars on which rests the whole fabric of society' (1909: 82). There is, therefore, a moral lesson in his argument: 'More and more, as times goes, morality shifts its ground from the sands of superstition to the rock of reason, from the imaginary to the real, from the supernatural to the natural' (1909: 81). In Frazer's reading of the mythological tale, the task imposed on Psyche by jealous Aphrodite consisted of 'sorting out the seeds of good from the seeds of evil'. In this way, the author is commenting on the grand task that he imposed upon himself, as

he sifted through the myriad examples of human behaviour that his voluminous books itemise in order to find within them the seeds of the institutions upon which civilisation, as he saw it, is founded.

This utopian declaration of faith in modernity and in the redeeming powers of the rational individual is very characteristic of his imperial epoch. To that extent, it should not surprise us. But it does help us to focus our mind on how distant we are from the assumptions that grant cogency to Frazer's argument. Words like 'savage', 'reason', 'morality', 'superstition', 'institution' no longer carry the same echoes for us that they carried in his day. They seem to have undergone a significant 'change of aspect' and that is why Frazer's argument sounds so quaint to us today. The following essay is inspired by Rodney Needham's methodological injunction that we should focus on such 'changes of aspect' of the analytical terms upon which our arguments depend. He claimed that identifying such 'changes of aspect' might help us detect both the 'treacherousness of words' and the 'secret sympathies' that transpire (1983: esp. 1–18).

For Frazer, a word such as 'institution' required little exegesis for it to be understood – he never even bothers to define it. But we can legitimately ask: how has the word changed during the intervening century? Furthermore, if we conclude it has, what 'secret sympathies' does it still carry within its cavernous belly? How are we affected today – one whole century later – by the implicit assumptions written into Frazer's use of the word?

If we are looking for a contemporary definition of 'institution' we can go, for example, to the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*: 'Typically, contemporary sociologists use the term to refer to complex social forms that reproduce themselves such as governments, the family, human languages, universities, hospitals, business corporations, and legal systems' (s.v. 'social institution'[1]).

The first thing to note here is the notion of 'complex social forms' – complex, in relation to what? Contrary to many of my colleagues, I am prone to feel uncomfortable when a feature of social life is described in relation to an opposing attribute that is left unspecified. Nothing is complex *in and of itself* without comparison with some other thing that is, somehow, less complex. We are, therefore, immediately left to wonder what other social forms might not be complex. Furthermore, we always have to ask in what capacity is that thing complex – and again the question seems somehow to have been elided. We know what came of the long history of categorical oppositions such as the one between 'complex societies' and those unnamed 'Other' societies. There, in those days (not so long ago – *The Social Anthropology of Complex Societies*, Banton 1966), the elided term was actually 'primitive', a concept that no one could shed but of which everyone was frightened. What is the elided term now? Are we not encountering here a set of 'secret sympathies' with Frazer's tracing of the inevitable path from savagery to civilisation as a process of rationalisation?

Let us look a little more attentively at the list of examples provided in the *Stanford Encyclopaedia* definition: the family, not families; governments, not the State; universities, not classrooms; legal systems, not practice of law business corporations, not voluntary associations; human languages, not sign systems... There is a strange coherence in the way these examples seem to line up and in what each one of them excludes by its very presence in the list. There is an unstated assumption here that institutions are hierarchical systems bound by explicit, rational, written codes.

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1   http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/social-institutions/

This assumption, in fact, is part of our common use of the word. For instance, if I say that 'in Portugal, cousins are an institution', I am in the limits of what I can expect a common speaker of English to understand and even social scientists are bound to find my use of the expression somewhat contrived or metaphoric. However, if I then go on to say that being the godfather of my cousin's child is an institutional aspect of my life, no one will take me seriously.

A similar sort of failure in semantic extension can be detected in the use that the capitalised word 'Institute' has been given over the past decades to name all sorts of modern, purpose-geared, formal organisations with a hierarchical structure. My employer, for example, is an Institute of Social Sciences. But here too, there seem to be limits to the word's relevance. For example, if I worked for an organisation that had nothing to do with the State, it would more likely be called an 'association' or a 'foundation' than an institute. An NGO is not likely to be called an institute, a factory is not likely to be called an institute, our university choir will not be called an institute. All of these are modern, purpose-geared, formal organisations with a hierarchical structure.

The matter has its legal implications, of course, in the sense that our codes of law and our established administrative practices enshrine certain usages of words such as institute, foundation and corporation, limiting their applicability. One might have searched there for examples. But it does not seem necessary, as I believe it is sufficiently clear by now that the notion of institution fits some contexts better than it does others whilst, at the same time, never losing its original broad sense. It is as if certain types of organised forms of behaviour typified better than others that broadest of all characteristics of societies: the constitution of institutions. By comparing its different contexts of use we get a sense of how it changes its aspect and how that reveals the sympathies it carries within itself.

Written into the way in which we have come to use the word 'institution', there is a modernist disposition to see society as a formally coherent system that imposes itself upon individuals. We acknowledge that the stuff of human institutions is the recurrent combination of modes of action with modes of thinking but, somehow, we see the epitome of that principle embodied in what Weber called the 'compulsory organizations' of modern, State-run, Western society. The imperial narrative about world history – to which Frazer adhered with the full force of 'reason' – seems to still explain the sympathies that ground the word's application today, much as, for anthropologists like us at the beginning of the 21st century, that imperial narrative is little more than a 'superstition'.

Ultimately, in this paper, I aim to contribute to a view of sociality as 'being in company'. As the paper concludes, I will propose a neurophenomenologically redefined concept of *mutuality*, where (i) thought is conceived of as a form of action and where (ii) persons are understood not to pre-exist intersubjective attunement. Therefore, I argue against the utopia of the rationalist individual that has dominated the social sciences throughout the 20th century with its representationalist and logocentric conceptions of mind.

In many ways, the paper is conceived as an alternative approach to institutionality to that recently proposed by Pascal Boyer and Michael Bang Petersen (2011).[2] As

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2   To my mind, the authors do not question sufficiently the implications of the conceptual tools they use: individual, marriage, law, reason, etc. For example, the statement that 'institutional designs are directly facilitated by the structure of human cognition' (Boyer and Petersen 2011: 12) turns

I see it, there is little to doubt in the observation that processes of human physical development impose marginal constraints to all historically evolved forms of human sociation. How this occurred in history, however, is what we need to trace out. Boyer and Petersen assume theories of causality that implicitly treat the sort of information that professional historians and ethnographers have been gathering over the past century as largely secondary in the face of 'real/natural' (biological, economic, material) causes. Now, Darwin's theory of evolution is a historicist form of explanation *par excellence*. Such treatments, therefore, are deeply contrary to the very spirit of the general theory they aim to uphold.

## Searle and the teleology of institutions

Let me start with another recent example that shows how little we have learnt from our mistakes over the past century of social scientific thinking. In 2010, John Searle, the well-known American philosopher, published a small but extremely ambitious book called *Making the Social World*, where he believes he succeeds in unearthing nothing less than 'the structure of human civilization'. In typical fashion, he starts from disembodied semantics – his criticism of Cartesian thinking does not seem to go as far as to question a representational model of mind (cf. Edelman 1992). So, he tells us that

> An institution is a system of constitutive rules, and such a system automatically creates the possibility of institutional facts. Thus the fact that Obama is president or the fact that I am a licensed driver or the fact that a chess match was won by a certain person and lost by a certain other person are all institutional facts because they exist within systems of constitutive rules. (2010: 10–11)

You will notice the interesting way in which, much like the earlier list taken from the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, there is a strange consistency in his examples. His examples are solidly rooted in his own upper middle-class American life experience: all of his three cases involve explicit legislation and literate rule making applied to fully individual persons whose engagement in society is made by rational contract.

   Constitutive rules, Searle argues, are systems that not only regulate what is done, but 'create the possibility of the very behaviour that they regulate'; for example, when I say, 'you are my boss', I institute in that way a previously inexistent hierarchy (2010: 10). According to him, then, institutional reality is created out of such declarations, that is, speech acts that change the world by declaring that a certain state of affairs is the case. Whilst, in actual fact, one might not need to utter the corresponding words, he tells us, one does use language in such a way as to assume the status functions that create institutions. Thus, he concludes, 'all of human institutional reality is created and maintained in existence by (representations that have the same logical form as) Status Function Declarations' (2010: 13). His representational institutions are best typified by the legalist ideology that pervades contemporary middle-class American modes of thinking.

out to be a truism for, whilst it is bound to seem reasonable to most contemporary readers, the subsequent structures of determination that are made to hang on it are (i) exceedingly simplistic and (ii) formulated in ahistorical terms.

The lessons of over 100 years of anthropological research do not seem to have penetrated Prof. Searle's worldview. Contemporary philosophical debates concerning *representation* (cf. Needham 1983; Brooks 1991; Clark 1997; Chemero 2009), anthropological debates concerning *dividuality* (cf. Strathern 1988; Mosko 2010; Pina-Cabral 2010a and 2011) or concerning the argumentative nature of human reasoning (cf. Mercier and Sperber 2011), and psychological debates concerning *ontogeny* (cf. Bråten 2006; Toren 2011) have caused no 'change of aspect' in Searle's use of the notions of 'institution', of 'group', or of 'individual'.

Yet we cannot blame him too much, for the trap was set for us from the start. This strange way in which the concept of institution is found at the logical root of all social phenomena but then is instantiated by modernist, State-associated, legalistic forms of behaviour has a long history in social thinking. Much like Searle's 'status function declarations', there is a teleological aspect to the word 'institution' in practically all of its uses. I say teleological to mean that institutions are supposed to have a purpose, to serve a finality, and to exist because of that finality.

The idea is enshrined in the word's very history. It derives from the Latin word *institutum*, which means 'purpose, design, plan, ordinance, instruction, precept'. It originated in the verb *statuere*, meaning 'to establish, or to cause to stand'. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word 'institute' has been used since the Renaissance in English and French and it bears four main meanings: firstly, to mean purpose (as in the English expression 'Satan's institute'); secondly, to mean something instituted like an established law, a custom, a usage or an organisation; thirdly, a principle or element of instruction; and fourthly, a society or organised group instituted to promote something of public relevance as well as the house wherein it is based. See how the meaning moves from functional relevance ('Satan's institute'), to formalised rules of behaviour answering that function (a principle of instruction), to a public organisation (the Institute of Social Sciences), to the building where that organisation is based (Av. Aníbal Bettencourt 9, Campo Grande, Lisbon).

Embedded in the meanings carried by the word institution, therefore, there is decidedly an implication of functional relevance: an institution is an organisation that serves a purpose. In short, if institutions are the very basis of all sociality, as most social thinkers seem to have agreed over the past 100 years, then the foundational fact of society involves finality, an act of will. Society seeking its own existence! This is the essence of what we call *sociocentrism*, following in this Durkheim and Mauss's (1963) own explicit formulation in their essay on primitive classifications.

Institutions exist because of the functions they perform for society; that much seems to be consensual ever since the social sciences cast away the divine narrative at the time of Darwin. They emerge from the depths of irrationality due to the very force of their rational purpose, which imposes itself with its purifying power. But how do these purposes impose themselves? What is the secret hand that prints them? There was a time in which it was possible to narrate explicitly how this worked out in history.

For example, this is how Westermarck told the story in 1908:

> The original character of the taboo must be looked for not in its civil but in its religious element. It was not the creation of a legislator, but the gradual outgrowth of animistic beliefs, to which the ambition and avarice of chiefs and priests afterwards gave an artificial extension. But in serving the cause of avarice and ambition it subserved the cause of civilization, by fostering the conceptions

of the rights of *property* and the sanctity of the *marriage tie*, – conceptions which in time grew strong enough to stand by themselves and to fling away the crutch of superstition which in earlier days had been their sole support. For we shall scarcely err in believing that even in advanced societies the moral sentiments, in so far as they are merely sentiments and are not based on an induction from experience, derive much of their force from an original system of taboo. Thus on the taboo were grafted the golden fruits of law and morality, while the parent stem dwindled slowly into the sour crabs and empty husks of popular superstition on which the swine of modern society are still content to feed.[3] (in Frazer 1909: 27, my emphasis)

We do have a tale of sociogenesis, then, but it has come to conflict with the world as we experience it since the end of the colonial era and we prefer to elide it. Ever since the late 1960s, we prefer to say of those we condone that they are 'complex', eliding the fact that this implies that the remainder are 'primitive'. We allow the secret sympathies constituted by the imperial narrative to operate unquestioned. Having no other, we allow the imperial narrative of sociogenesis to pass in silence by means of what Frazer would have called small acts of sympathetic logic. After all, we too seem to be feeding on 'sour crabs and empty husks'.

## Mauss' minimalist definition

Let us follow some of the principle turning points in the history of the word institution. In an essay on 'religious facts', written in 1906, Durkheim's principal disciples, Hubert and Mauss define the concept of institution as 'public rules of action and thought' (in Mauss 1968/1969: 25).[4] They argue that both sacrifice and magic are, indeed, institutions in this sense: the first [sacrifice] in a public fashion, as the nature of the representations at stake are open to all; the second [magic] in a less public but nonetheless still collective fashion. For them, as indeed for Durkheim (and it would seem for Searle as well), society is composed of organically separate individuals who, in a sense, abdicate of their independence in the name of the collective: 'We believe we have (. . .) demonstrated how, in magic, the individual only thinks, only acts under the guidance of tradition or pressed by a collective suggestion, or at least by a suggestion that he provides to himself under the pressure of the collectivity' (1968 [1906], I: 25).

In fact, they explicitly want to defend themselves against the attack by certain colleagues who had accused them of having overextended their expertise as sociologists because they made a study of categories, whilst sociologists should limit themselves to institutions. But they explicitly refuse to separate acting from thinking:

Sociologists, it would seem, must limit themselves to groups and their traditional practices. But these people seem to forget that there are ways of thinking in common as well as ways of acting in common. Calendars [for example] are social things as well as feasts, signs, or telepathic phenomena, just as much as expiations

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3   This simile of his less civilised coevals to 'swine' might be softened if we concede that he is assuming that pigs are fed on crab apples and acorns, as was perhaps the case in his day.

4   In *Oeuvres* (1967, I), Hubert and Mauss (in Mauss 1968/1969) 'L'analyse des faits réligieux'. All translations of texts referenced in French editions are my own responsibility.

for bad luck. All of these are institutions. The notions of sacred, soul, time, etc., are all equally institutions because, as a matter of fact, they do not exist in the mind of the individual otherwise than dressed in the forms that they took from specific societies. The individual receives them, through education, in traditional formulae. They are, therefore, the objects of sociology. (1968 [1906], I: 36)

Note the fascinating way in which the authors are explicit about the epistemology of their undertaking: they explain, in a frank manner, that later social theorists are prone to abandon, that ideas as such actually occur in the heads of individual persons as representations and that the collective nature of these is constituted by the way they are 'dressed' – 'revêtues de formes qu'elles ont prises dans des sociétes déterminées', that is their actual formulation (1968 [1906], I: 36). We find here echoes of the way in which, for Mauss, in his essay on the person, individuals in primitive society are 'masked' by the roles they are supposed to assume in order to become legitimate social agents.

In a text about the objects and methods of sociology, now in co-authorship with Paul Falconnet,[5] Mauss explains that 'each individual encounters [these habits or customs] already formed, so to speak *instituted*, since he is not their author, since he receives them from the outside, they are thus *preexisting*' (his emphasis, 1969 [1901], III: 149). The word 'institution', therefore, is best used to describe 'an already instituted set of actions and ideas that individuals find before them and that impose themselves on them to a greater or lesser extent' (1969 [1901], III: 150). And, they proceed: 'Institution, therefore, in the social order, plays the same role as function in the biological order; and in the same way that life science is the science of vital functions, so the science of society is the science of institutions thus described' (1969 [1901], III: 150).

There is a curious inconsistency in Mauss's writings over the years since, whilst he insists on the way in which institutions include both actions and thoughts, he never abandons the separation between what he and Durkheim called the 'physiology of practice' defined as 'social actions, social practices and institutions' and the 'physiology of representation' defined as 'ideas and collective feelings' (1969 [1901], III: 208). Theirs is a decidedly neo-Kantian anthropology.

In Durkheim's earlier work *De la division du travail social*, written in 1893, the concept of institution is introduced by means of a discussion of medieval corporations, which are seen as the basis of the modern state. They are institutions in so far as they persist through time independently of their particular manifestations (1967 [1897], I: 21) and to the extent that they fulfil the purposes for which they were created (1967 [1897], I: 25). Here again we witness the tendency to jump from (i) a minimalist principle of sociality to (ii) its supposedly perfect instantiation in formal modern organisations: 'For a professional morality and law to establish itself in the different economic professions it was necessary for the corporation, instead of remaining a confused aggregate without unity, to become (or rather to become again) a defined, organised group; in a word, a public institution' (1967 [1897], I: 19). So, we conclude that, for the old master, a public institution is 'a defined, organised group'. This tendency to associate (i) with (ii) constitutes a semantic slippage[6] that runs through the whole history of the word 'institution' in the 20th century, as it is what allows it to carry the meanings that we have all become used to attribute to it.

5   In *Oeuvres* (1967, III), Falconnet and Mauss 'La Sociologie. Objet et Méthode'.
6   I use the expression here in the sense of double reading and verbal association.

In fact, in Durkheim, the evolutionary nature of the association is quite explicit even though its formulation sounds less imperial to our ears than the formulations by Frazer and Westermarck presented above. He describes for us a process whereby, in the history of humanity, basic institutions are progressively overlaid by other institutions without fully disappearing. Thus, 'for the division of labour to be able to develop, it was necessary for men to cast off the yoke of heredity, for progress to break castes and classes. The progressive disappearance of the latter tends, in fact, to prove the reality of that emancipation; since one cannot very well see how, if heredity had not lost its rights over the individual, it might have been weakened as an institution' (1967 [1897], II: 71).

But these ancient institutions remain as the ground, so to speak, upon which the other more perfect institutions are seated.

> Ancient institutions never fully disappear before new institutions, to the point of leaving no trace of themselves. They persist, not only as survivals, but also because something of the needs to which they responded continues to persist. Effective neighbourhood will ever constitute a link among men; therefore, the political and social organization on a territorial base will certainly survive. Only, it will not have any longer actual preponderance, precisely because that link has lost some of its force. (1967 [1897], I: 37)

## Weber's compulsory organisations

The Durkheimian formulation is arguably the most influential use of the word 'institution' in sociological and anthropological theory over the 20th century. For example, in an extremely influential essay, the Huxley Memorial Lecture of 1951, called 'The Comparative Method in Social Anthropology' (1952: 15–22), Radcliffe-Brown again uses the word institution in this broad Durkheimian sense by referring to joking relationships and to moiety exogamy as institutions. This minimalist sense of the word, best suited to Mauss's definition of 'public rules of action and thought' might have won the day. Still, as we saw in Searle, and as we see in everyday socioscientific lingo all around us, the other meaning enshrined in the *Stanford Encyclopaedia* definition ('complex social forms that reproduce themselves . . .') is equally important. For clarity sake, we will refer to this second meaning as the 'complex definition'.

I strongly suspect that this definition is on the whole due to the influence of Max Weber's work which, whilst roughly contemporary with that of Durkheim and Mauss, only came to have an impact on the social sciences outside Germanophone circles after the 1930s and, most decidedly, through the agency of Talcott Parsons, after the Second World War. Certainly, in anthropology, as Marshall Sahlins has recently reminded us (2011: 6–7), Clifford Geertz and David Schneider, students of Parsons at Harvard, went on to become extremely influential world-wide. Surely they had an influence in this.[7]

The neoinstitutionalist school in economy is especially responsible for developing the line of interpretation of the word that is more associated with Weber's complex definition and less with Mauss' minimalist definition. I would be totally out of my depth,

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7   It is interesting how this modifies the more common 'Boas, Benedict, Mead' pedigree of 'culture' that he reproduced earlier on in the introduction to his influential short book *Historical Metaphors* (Sahlins 1981).

however, if I even pretended lightly to present here economic neoinstitutionalism.[8] So I will limit myself to calling your attention to the fact that the actual word that Weber used was not 'institution' but *Anstalten* – a term that hardly bears the implications that characterise the Latin word that came to translate it in French and English after Weber's impact on social thinking in the second half of the 20th century.

In Weber's *Economy and Society* (1968 [1956]), the translators[9] decided that the concept of *Anstalten* should be translated as 'institutions', even although for Weber the proper definition of the term would have been closer to 'compulsory organizations'. The term *Anstalt* (feminine noun) means roughly 'establishment'. It comes from *Anstellen* meaning 'to engage, to hire, to employ, to staff' which, in turn, is very closely linked to *Einstellen* meaning 'to adjust, to hire, to engage, to configure'. Thus, the German word – meaning 'to make arrangements for' or 'to get ready to' – also bears the purpose-geared (teleological) implications implicit in the Latin term but, instead of the architectural metaphor, it seems to focus more on human engagement.

In order to define *Anstalten*, Weber starts with the notion of 'organization', that is, as he puts it, 'a social relationship which is either closed or limits the admission of outsiders (and whose) regulations are enforced by specific individuals (...) with representative powers'. *Anstalten* are 'compulsory organizations', that is, 'organizations where there is a person or persons in authority carrying into effect the order governing the organization' (1968 [1956], I: 48).

For him, a compulsory organisation must be a 'formal organization', that is, it must possess 'a continuously and rationally operating staff' (1968 [1956], I: 52). Finally, he is specific: 'an organization which imposes, within a specifiable sphere of operations, its order (with relative success) on all action conforming with certain criteria will be called a compulsory organization or association (*Anstalt*)' (1968 [1956], I: 52). Note that, here, 'compulsory organization', 'association', and in English translation 'institution' are held to be synonyms. In fact, the word *institution*, which does exist in German and is given in most German dictionaries as a synonym of *Anstalt*, only appears in Weber's work passingly.

For Weber, the compulsory organisations par excellence are the *State*, 'with its subsidiary heterocephalous organizations', and the *Church*, and whether the individual joins these institutions voluntarily or not does not change the situation. Note the difference of implications from the Durkheimian use of the word, where individuals are moulded by institutions and yet cannot but join them, since that is the very condition of sociality.

Elsewhere Weber gives us a more complete definition of *Anstalten* which fully confirms this reading (and here the editors, Roth and Wittich, actually alert us to the fact that the word has two meanings: institution and compulsory organisation): 'groups in which (i) membership depends on objective criteria regardless of the declared will of those included (in contrast to the 'voluntary association') and (ii) rationally established rules and an enforcement apparatus codetermine individual action (in contrast to amorphous consensual grouping which lack a rationally established order)' (1968 [1956], II: 1380). Evidently, such a description fails to apply to Mauss' minimalist institutions such as calendars, marriages, magic beliefs, etc.

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8    Theirs is the inspiration of Boyer and Peteresen (2011).
9    Among whom Talcott Parsons.

## Parsons' and Goffman's individualist versions

At the hands of Talcott Parsons (and, I suggest, via his students, this applies to American 'cultural anthropology' in general), the word institution underwent a redefinition at mid-century, not so much in what it pertained to describe but due to the implications of the new individualist theoretical mould in which it was placed.

Parsons explicitly tells us that he is conjoining Durkheimian and Weberian insights. For him, the French master proposed 'a genuinely structural-functional treatment of the social system...' but Weber 'went much farther than any other writer toward the underpinning of empirical study of comparative institutions with a generalised theoretical scheme. Incomplete though it was, it converged with Durkheim's scheme and supplemented it in the directions where comparative structural perspective is most important' (1954 [1949]: 227).

For Parsons, 'The fundamental, structurally stable element of social systems (...) is their structure of institutional patterns defining the roles of their constituent actors' (1954 [1949]: 231). These institutional patterns are formulated in psychological terms as 'systems of patterned legitimate expectations': 'the complex patterns which define expected behaviour [...] may be referred to as an institution' (1954 [1949]: 337). Note how (i) 'complex patterns' become (ii) 'an institution'. Moreover, he is quite explicit about his psychologistic reductionism: '(...) psychological categories in social science play a fundamental role which is in some respects analogous to biochemistry in biological science' (1954 [1949]: 337).

Thus, he concludes with the following definition of 'institution':

> the essential aspect of social structure lies in a system of patterned expectations defining the *proper* behaviour of persons playing certain roles, enforced by the incumbent's own positive motives for conformity and by the sanctions of others. Such systems of patterned expectations, seen in the perspective of their place in a total social system and sufficiently thoroughly established in action to be taken for granted as legitimate, are conveniently called 'institutions'. (1954 [1949]: 231)[10]

We are here reminded of how different this individualist take is from either Durkheim's or Weber's emphases on groupness.

Interestingly, in terms of Parsons' subsequent influence on the anthropology of kinship via Schneider,[11] his first example of what such an institution might look like is also 'the institution of marriage'. We can clearly see here the semantic slippage that runs through all of the authors we will consider in this essay: is (i) 'marriage' the institution; are (ii) individual marriages (as between Ann and Peter) also institutions; or can both instances be considered institutions (as when the second is treated as an instantiation of the first)?

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10   Elsewhere he concludes in similar fashion: 'Institutions (...) are patterns governing behaviour and social relationships which have become interwoven with a system of common moral sentiments which in turn define what one has a "right to expect" of a person in a certain position' (1954 [1949]: 143). Here, 'common moral sentiments' are identified with 'patterned expectations' in the definition above. Both are seen as individual psychological phenomena.

11   Cf. Parsons' premonitory essay 'The Kinship System of the Contemporary United States', first published in 1943 (in Parsons 1954 [1949]: 177–97).

In Parsons, Mauss' 'sets of actions and ideas that individuals find before them and that impose themselves on them to a greater or lesser extent' become explicitly formulated as psychological dispositions (expectations or sentiments) that then produce social entities. His attempt to combine this Durkheimian heritage with a Weberian concern for legitimacy results in a deeply individualist outlook.

At roughly the same time, another German author started being read by social scientists around the world whose notion of the person would contribute to a far greater sophistication of the discourse concerning personhood and society, Georg Simmel.[12] He reminded his readers of the essential incompletude of the social condition, both in that 'life is not entirely social' and in that 'All of us are fragments, not only of general man, but also of ourselves' (1959 [1923]: 343). He was deeply aware that people are constituted by interactions with others, which installs an ethical process of co-responsibility: 'every individual knows that the other is tied to him' (1959 [1923]: 341). This, however, meant that our insertion into society would always remain partial. Due to our awareness of our own personhood, we will always remain partially outside society. As he puts it (taking recourse to a metaphor that is deeply significant), 'to be one with God is conditioned in its very significance by being other than God' (1959 [1923]: 348).

In the work of Erving Goffman, these diverse influences are taken to a higher level of sophistication. His work was probably the most influential in our contemporary use of the word 'institution'. On the whole, his position is more compatible with what we agreed to call Weber's complex definition than with Mauss' minimalist definition. 'Total institutions', the central category for which he is famous is framed as an instance of a 'utilitarian organization' – the teleological theme being, once again, predominant.

Goffman's avowed aim was 'to develop a sociological version of the structure of the self'. Although he starts from the individual's point of view, he de-essentialises it, claiming 'There is no essence that exists inside an individual, waiting to be given expression in social situations' (1961a: xiii). The experience of individuals in society is, thus, determined by principles of organisation that attribute meaning and context to it. Since the self is socially produced, 'it depends upon validation awarded and withheld in accordance with the norms of a stratified society' (Lemert and Branaman 1997: xlvi). The individual does have the option of failing to accomplish what is expected of him/her, but 'normally' he or she chooses to oblige.

Goffman's constructivist and highly sophisticated notion of the individual distances him from Parsons' reductionist definition of institutions as 'patterned expectations' or 'common sentiments'. The most general definition of an institution that he gives us, right at the beginning of *Asylums* (Goffman 1961a), is that of a place where a specific activity is commonly undertaken. Institutions for him are 'social entities' and the term is often used as synonym of 'organization', 'social establishment' and 'social arrangement'. Here again we see the semantic slippage that we have come to expect: a social entity being defined by the space it occupies, by the utilitarian purpose that determines its rules of functioning, and as a group of individuals.

Nevertheless, his understanding of institution, in line with Weberian use, seems to be open to diversification. In *Stigma* (1963), as Anna Branaman notes, Goffman 'makes a total institution of the whole society. Society could be considered a total

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12  Simmel's deep influence, via Franz B. Steiner, on the founding father of Mediterranean anthropology, Julian Pitt-Rivers, has not received the attention it deserves (cf. Pina-Cabral 2009).

institution insofar as it is the basis of a single, universal system of honor that determines the complement of attributes individuals must possess in order to be accorded full-fledged humanity' (Lemert and Branaman 1997: lviii). This is a book where the issue of 'normality' – the individual's usual willingness to oblige – is the central preoccupation.

To the contrary, in *Encounters* – a collection of essays published in the same year as *Asylums* – we find instances of a broader use of the notion of institution that harp back to Mauss' minimalist definition; for example, when he calls an 'institution' to the legal principle of attenuating circumstances (that is, the fact that people who should be doing something may be legitimately drawn away from what is expected of them due to their having conflicting obligations; 1961b: 141). Again, elsewhere, he calls trial by champion an institution.

So, even this author, who is so close to the Weberian definition of *Anstalten* as compulsory organisations and to the Parsonian assumption of modernity as the relevant context, preserves the uncertainty that we witnessed in the whole history of the term between Mauss' minimalist definition and Weber's complex one. This, however, is further compounded by a semantic slippage that is also characteristic of the whole history of the term, between (i) treating the principle of organisation as the institution (as when one considers the marriage institution to be constituted by the collective representations concerning conjugality) or (ii) treating the instantiation of those representations as the institution (as in the marriage of Ann and Peter). It is as if we were to confuse the recipe with the cooked dish.

## Berger and Luckman's institution as knowledge

Parsons' 'common sentiments' leading to 'systems of patterned legitimate expectations' become Goffman's 'social arrangements' objictified in places and roles. The next step in the development is probably best exemplified by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman's (1966) time-setting sociology of knowledge where the individualist onus is reduced but the semiotic emphasis is stressed.

For them, the coming into existence of institutions ('institutionalization') is an instance of the exercise of habit ('habitualization'). An institution, therefore, is to be understood as a 'reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors' (Berger and Luckman 1966: 70–85, esp. 72). Whilst, therefore, institutions are essentially 'taken-for-granted routines' that depend on knowledge, they do force themselves upon individuals, assuming a compulsory character. In this way, they are experienced as being external to the person, 'unalterable and self-evident' (1966: 77).

The institutional world is humanly produced, but the historic process through which that occurs and the integration that eventually emerges among institutions affecting each other reciprocally, are not accessible to the individual participants. 'It, therefore, becomes necessary to interpret this meaning to them in various legitimating formulas' (Berger and Luckman 1966: 79). And again we see that the issue of legitimation brings about the familiar topic of the teleological nature of institutions – their purpose – and the corresponding sociocentric echoes. We are here nearest to Weber's understanding even though the authors too are explicit about the fact that they want to combine *The Rules of the Sociological Method* (Durkheim) with *Economy and Society* (Weber). In their own words, they want to reconcile what they see as the two essential

statements in these works: 'Society does indeed possess objective facticity. And society is indeed built up by activity that expresses subjective meaning' (1966: 30).

They stress primarily the notion that subjective meanings both produce institutions and are produced by them through habitualisation. The category on which they centrally rely in order to bridge (to mediate) between societal objectivity and individual subjectivity is 'knowledge'. They define it as 'a body of generally valid truths about reality' (Berger and Luckman 1966: 83) and they define 'reality' as 'a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition' (1966: 13). In this sense, they stay well within the Cartesian epistemological tradition that marks all of social scientific thinking throughout the 20th century (cf. Edelman 1992).

What motivates institutionalised conduct for them is 'a body of transmitted recipe knowledge' so that 'What is taken for granted as knowledge in the society comes to (...) provide the framework within which anything not yet known will come to be known in the future' (Berger and Luckman 1966: 83). Finally, knowledge objectifies the society's world 'through language and the cognitive apparatus based on language, that is, it orders it into objects to be apprehended as reality' (1966: 84). In the end, instead of our more familiar reduction to sentiment (as in Durkheim or Parsons), we find here a logocentric reduction – one where language comes to be the stuff of which society is constructed, as knowledge tends to be equated with what can normally be transmitted through language.

Berger and Luckman – together with most of the semiotically inspired anthropologists of the past decades – speak of knowledge being transmitted, processed, shared, stored, etc. Yet what is 'knowledge' precisely? When I experience knowledge, and then communicate knowledge, thus sharing knowledge, precisely what am I doing? The problem with such formulations is that they rely on a notion of 'knowledge' and of 'collective representation' that is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain for us today in the face of all of the evidence and theorising concerning cognition that has been emerging over the past 20 years (cf. Needham 1983: 32; Pina-Cabral 2010a). The fact that Berger and Luckman's notion of knowledge is deeply associated with language and with conscious thinking means that we lose much of the complexity of the cognition/information/cognition transformation.

As Simmel warned us, there is a deep uncertainty as to the actual nature of the thing that this 'knowledge' constitutes (1959 [1923]: 339–40).[13] We are surely obliged to distinguish between four different aspects that, somehow, this notion of knowledge conjoins. Firstly, the *cognitive processes* that, on the face of it, are what constitutes knowledge. These, however, are ultimately private, since they are indeterminate and cannot be fully shared. Furthermore, they are largely not conscious, in the sense of accessible to the self. Secondly, the *modes of objectification* in the world of such cognitive processes. These can result from all sorts of processes of voluntary communication – through gesture, sound, writing, etc. Yet, our thoughts are also passively inscribed into the world as a result of actions that, in their complexity, far overtook any conscious desire to communicate. Thirdly, these acts of objectification produce *information*, which can be shared, stored, manipulated, etc. This information accumulates historically and it constantly surrounds us as a constitutive part of our world. Finally, through *interpretive charity* (cf. Davidson 2001; Pina-Cabral 2010a), considerable overlap comes to occur

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13  Simmel calls it 'the fundamental psychologico-epistemological paradigm and problem of sociation' (1959 [1923]: 339–40).

between my own cognitive processes and those of others, which allows for large overlaps in the way we see the world. Simmel warned us, 'We cannot know completely the individuality of another' (1959 [1923]: 343). It turns out that it was a mistake to take this warning merely as a small side matter.

To see the problems that such notions of knowledge and collective representation bring about, all we need do is ask: is 'shared intentionality' knowledge? For example, I walk down the street silently with a friend and, characteristically, our movements somehow synchronise. A third party immediately becomes aware that we are 'together' without even knowing (being conscious of) why she assumes it. Is this the sort of 'knowledge' that they have in mind? Probably not, judging from the examples they provide us with. And yet, this type of shared intentionality constitutes, after all, the very stuff of institutionalisation (cf. Tomasello 2008).

Duranti has recently reminded us that Husserl's notion of intentionality – 'an aboutness or directedness toward the world that is not necessarily equivalent to rational action' (2007: 492) – is often misused. Thus, Husserl's

> notion of intersubjectivity accommodates phenomena that include but also go beyond what another person is thinking, wishing, or feeling. (...) It is already at work when a person is aware of the presence of others in his or her surrounding world. Such a presence may include language but in many cases consists of perceived embodied actions and dispositions that may or may not be directed at us and yet help define our own sense of an objective world that is shared with others. (2007: 491)

Recent formulations of cognition have gone well beyond the logocentric model of mind (cf. Chemero 2009). Whilst anthropologists have endlessly debated the topic of embodiment over the past decades, seldom have they realised that, without a clearly formulated notion of extended cognition (cf. Clark and Chalmers 1998), and with our continued logocentrism and our proneness to typify self as conscious thought, we will fail to break the mind/body polarity (cf. Toren 2011).

Whilst Mauss' minimalist definition of institution has the benefit of focusing on the mutual integration of action and thinking and Weber's complex definition has the benefit of focusing on structures of authority and domination, both separate the process of human sociality and human understanding from the world. They both fail to see that persons do not pre-exist intersubjective attunement and that this operates through a process of triangulation between self, other and world where all three elements are intrinsically involved (cf. Davidson 2001).

## Conclusion

Other authors might easily have been called to witness – and surely Bourdieu and Foucault would have constituted major candidates – but I will stop at this point out of necessity. Nevertheless, I have found it instructive to discover that the word 'institution' as used by us in our daily practice of social science *but also in our daily practice of bureaucratic engagement* is inherently ambiguous. Now, this slippage is a *crime de lèse-sociologie* as Durkheim would have it, even though he practised it himself. But then we can pardon him, for he actually was an evolutionist, so the slippage from the

minimalist sense to its ultimate complex realisation in modern bureaucratic entities made theoretically relevant sense for him, which it does not for us today.

Similarly, in the works of Parsons and Goffman, the centrality given to modern contexts worked at hiding the ambiguity. But Berger and Luckman's work helped us to see that what ties together the two modes of institution is much more than the implicit evolutionary link that Durkheim and his contemporaries theorised. There is also an implicit individualist notion of personhood that sees society as willing itself into existence by imposing itself upon individuals and that relies on a representational notion of mind. Whilst most sociocultural anthropologists have been constructivists in one way or another from the times of Mauss and Simmel, they remain within a contractual model of society and they continue to operate with notions of self that are individualist, logocentric and mentalistic.[14]

The general use given to the word institution in contemporary sociocultural anthropology can best be surmised from George Augustins' short but clear entry 'Institution' in Bonte and Izard's *Dictionnaire de l'Ethnologie et l'Anthropologie*. His primary definition addresses directly the teleological proclivity: institution is 'all that, in a given society, takes the shape of an organized apparatus [*dispositif*], pertaining to assist the functioning or reproduction of that society, resulting from an original will (act of instituting) and adhesion, at least tacit, to its supposed legitimacy' (Augustins 1991: 398). He then goes on to speak of 'values and norms' in Maussian fashion as the primary meaning but continues by saying: 'Furthermore, it is frequent – but not necessary – that an institution includes agents (even a whole administration), guided by a structure of authority which is particular to it. Usually also it possesses a system of sanctions [. . .] and a complex of rites of passage [. . .]' (1991: 398). It would seem, therefore, that Augustins is plainly conscious of the semantic slippage but, his role being to report on the usual meaning of the word for the dictionary, he limits himself to declaring it.

Curiously, his primary example of institution is also marriage! As a matter of fact, the choice of marriage as the institution par excellence that we have observed in practically all authors presented here cannot be simply taken as innocent – note that Boyer and Petersen too, in their recent attempt to propose a theory of institutions, start from 'marriage' as the paradigmatic case. Yet, from the days of Leach, Needham and Rivière (1971: 57–74), we have known that this is perhaps one of the more Eurocentric notions that anthropology has attempted to universalise unsuccessfully. Should this not have been a warning? History writes itself into our thinking in silent ways!

Today, in our everyday use of the notion of institution, we are not only conjoining Mauss' minimalist definition with Weber's very distinct complex definition, thus assuming an evolutionist tale (the imperial narrative) that we no longer condone. Further still, we are confusing the process of institutionalisation (marriage) with the historically situated entities it produces (the marriage of Ann and Peter). In fact, the two semantic slippages work towards legitimating each other since, as a rule, Weber's 'compulsory organizations' are described in the plural as instituted institutions, while Mauss' processes of action and thought are typified as generic forms of institutionalisation in the singular.

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14  For a fascinating discussion of the topic, where the conflicting aspects are engaged but left unsolved, see Mary Douglas' (1995) time-setting paper.

I want to conclude by suggesting how we might avoid some of these problems. We must surely start from Mauss' minimalist definition – 'public rules of action and thought' (see also Introduction, in this issue) – by substituting his emphasis on 'rule-bound behaviour' by a neurophenomenologically redefined notion of *mutuality* where thought is conceived of as a form of action (cf. Toren 2011; Pina-Cabral n.d.). Once this is done, we must then acknowledge that birds and bees also have 'institutions' and cast aside all simplistic forms of human exceptionalism (cf. Schaeffer 2007).

Institutional behaviour is part of human life and, as such, of biological evolution as much as copulating or eating. Our survival as a species depends on institutionalisation as much as that of other species, even though human life does have characteristics that are specifically human – above all language. There is a price to pay, however: firstly, we will be obliged to break with the semantic slippage that has been at the centre of social scientific thinking throughout the 20th century between (i) institutionalisation in general (often leading to social entities structured by explicit norms) and (ii) the 'compulsory organizations' that have come to characterise modern living; secondly, we have to abandon the imperial narrative and, with it, the utopia of the rational individual.

In short, to institute is to prop up, to grant entity status to a certain aspect of the world by situating it relationally. It is an exercise in prospective memory, as it involves recognising that a set of patterns will thenceforth concur. Instituting, thus, is a future-oriented gesture that invests a set of patterns with conditions of continuity: it is a singularity project. Furthermore, as humans are in the world socially, the project-nature of instituting is necessarily coextensive with sociality. The world's diffuse multiplicity is the basic, and ever recurring condition; singularity and its partibilities are what human life produces. Instituting is a process of shared intentionality carried out by persons who, being mutually constituted, are in the process of becoming singular persons (Strathern 1988: 11–15). What gives rise to the expectation of singularity is the overlap of memories between the persons involved. As such, the condition of instituting is mutuality, not some kind of negotiation between dualistically confronted partners. The mutual engagement between the persons involved is rooted in early ontogeny, a form of intersubjectivity anterior to any conscious, linguistically-shaped decision-making. It has less to do with thinking than with being in company.

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*João de Pina-Cabral*
*Institute of Social Sciences*
*University of Lisbon*
*Av. A. Bettencourt 9*
*1600-189 Lisboa*
*Portugal*
*pina.cabral@ics.ul.pt*

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