

How to Misuse Institutions and Get Away with It: Some Reflections on Institutional Theory(ies)

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THE ABUNDANCE OF DEFINITIONS

The editors of this volume asked me to write about the uses and misuses of institutional theory – a quest that provided me with a perverse pleasure. In my reading, the most interesting interpretations of institutional theory result from the misuse of the term ‘institution’; in Latin that means a human, intentional act of creating and enacting some type of collective practice. As noted by March and Olsen (1989) in their overview of various definitions of the word, this meaning is used primarily in law and economics. In the everyday meaning of the word (which enters almost every scholarly text), however, an institution is a public administration organization. Another meaning, close to it, is the Goffmanian definition: ‘Social establishments – institutions in the everyday sense of that term – are *places* such as rooms, suites of

rooms, buildings, or plants *in which activity of a particular kind regularly goes on*’ (Goffman, 1961: 15, my italics). But Goffman also spoke of ‘members of an institution’ (1961), which is closer to Mary Douglas’s suggestion that institutions are legitimized social groupings (Douglas, 1986: 41).

None of this, however, is close to what Thorsten Veblen (1899) seemed to mean when speaking of institutions. To begin with, Veblen used the term ‘institution,’ assuming that it did not require a definition: ‘The institution of a leisure class is found in its best development at the higher stages of the barbarian culture’ (1899: 1); and ‘In the sequence of cultural evolution the emergence of a leisure class coincides with the beginning of ownership. This is necessarily the case, for these two institutions result from the same set of economic forces’ (1899: 15). Veblen was a cultural evolutionist, and

believed that people who act collectively form certain patterns of action that are eventually taken for granted. If they are contested or broken, it results in normative justifications, corrections or/and sanctions. Such normatively justified patterns of action are institutions.

Gabriel Tarde would have agreed, but added that people also imitate one another; after all, it was Tarde who launched the notion of diffusion in social sciences. He did not think, however, that ideas spread like particles; in his view, particles may spread the way ideas do, as he believed that natural sciences should borrow metaphors from social sciences, not the other way around.

Tarde is often seen as a 'diffusionary evolutionist,' as he differed from diffusionists (the early school in anthropology, represented by Franz Boas, 1904/1974) in noting the variation inherent in each displacement, and from evolutionists in pointing out the role of action, i.e. imitation. Thus he spoke of 'evolution by association' (Tarde, 1893/1999: 41) à la Stephen Jay Gould, or 'diffusion by transformation.' His influence is rarely acknowledged by the contemporary institutionalists, however, as they seem to prefer his rival, Emile Durkheim. This inclination may change, as 'Tardomania' has supposedly made an appearance, at least in France, Italy, Germany, and Denmark (Mucchielli, 2000; Latour, 2002).

At this point, some readers may expect a recommendation that the interested community of scholars should mobilize, turning institutionalism into a 'proper theory,' with proper definitions of its subject and a set of axioms and logically connected statements. This, in my view, would be the death of institutional theory as we have learned to know and appreciate it. Apart from the fact that any social theory would be killed by strict formalization, the strength of institutional theory lies in the tolerance of its propagandists. Here, I think, most thanks should be directed to Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio (1991). Had they insisted on policing the field, it would have turned

barren in no time. As it is, institutional theory is not a theory at all, but a framework, a vocabulary, a way of thinking about social life, which may take many paths. It would be my recommendation to attempt an institutional theory account of institutional theory.

This is probably too large a task for a single author or a single text, at least this author and this text; the Reflection part of this volume consists, in fact, of contributions toward that purpose. My own input comprises three pieces that may be added to a larger mosaic: a reflection on the local variations of institutional theory, a commentary on the (mostly missing) connection between institutions and technology, and a suggestion of possible gains from insights concerning institutions in literature theory.

LOCAL TRANSLATIONS: 'SCANDINAVIAN INSTITUTIONALISM'

When the word got around that Steve Barley and Pamela Tolbert (1997) had written about 'European institutionalism,' all of us in Scandinavia ran to check who and what would be quoted. Much to our surprise, the 'European institutionalists' turned out to be Max Weber and Emile Durkheim and the contemporary writers were represented by Anthony Giddens. Not for the first time we could observe that 'local knowledge' seems to be of interest primarily when it reproduces 'global knowledge', which is that which circulates at any given time among many localities.

Yet all local translators arrive at their own version or versions of the global idea. Guje Sevón and I coined the term 'Scandinavian institutionalism' (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996) to denote works from Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, written under the influence of Richard W. Scott, James G. March, and John W. Meyer.¹ What seemed to characterize this group of texts and authors was a common interest in the construction and deconstruction of institutions

(institutionalization and deinstitutionalization) as the most fruitful way of conceptualizing social order.

This interest may be seen as being shared by all social sciences, so further delimitations are needed. The Scandinavian translators were mostly organization scholars, so the issue of organizing was of central interest to them. For many decades, organization theory has been developed around the rational theory of choice as applied to decision making. This theory did a poor job of explaining the results of studies conducted in the field of organizational practice. To explain why the Scandinavians exhibited such great interest in new institutional theory, a few words on the tradition of organization studies in Scandinavia are in order.

To begin, Scandinavian organization theorists had traditionally had a strong interest in the *practice of organizing*. Long before Pierre Bourdieu legitimized 'social practices' as the central study object, Scandinavian researchers studied 'praxis' ('practices' cannot be used in plural in Scandinavian languages) of organized work. This interest led naturally to a great number of field studies, facilitated by easy access, especially to public sector organizations, where the transparency rule permitted researchers access to anything that was not classified as confidential. As a result, perhaps, the approach has been strongly process-oriented, as opposed to structure-oriented.

Furthermore, in conscious opposition to the universalizing tendencies, the researchers were taking the embeddedness of the practices they studied very seriously indeed. This focus did not make their interests parochial; indeed, connectedness was another typical trait of Scandinavian research (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2003). Most authors are well versed in the North American tradition, albeit they treat it critically; are familiar with European developments; and, more recently, direct their curiosity to the remaining continents, especially Asia and Australia. This practically demands a great openness to other academic disciplines, and results in the

transdisciplinary character of Scandinavian organization theory, with its roots in economics and engineering, but also with strong links to sociology, psychology, and anthropology.

Field studies were rendering unequivocal results; it was action rather than decision that was at the center of organizing (Brunsson, 2007). As pointed out by March and Olsen (1989), organizational action heeds the logic of appropriateness, and not, as the theory of rational choice would have it, the logic of consequentiality. Actions are decided on the basis of actors' classifications of the situation in which they find themselves, as well as their own identity. Logic of consequentiality or of rational choice is used to legitimize the actions undertaken, especially when questioned. The combination of insights of one of the classic authors of decision-making theory and a Norwegian political scientist resulted in the theory that fit the data, as the Scandinavians found them.

Why 'new' institutionalism? The 'old' institutionalism emphasized the central role of norms and socialization processes, of rule and role conflict, and revealed that rules and identities are taken for granted in a 'normal attitude.' Institutions could be thus defined as collections of stable rules and roles and corresponding sets of meanings and interpretations.

New institutionalism, as presented by Powell and DiMaggio (1991), adopted the centrality of the logic of appropriateness in organizational action, and continued the emphasis on rules and roles, as well as the construction of meaning that occurs in organizations. It also radicalized older approaches by presenting identities as results of actions rather than their antecedents (see especially Meyer, 1986); it dynamized them by focusing upon the process of rule development (institutionalization); and it increased their complexity by adding nuances to the theory of conflict.

It has been suggested by many critics, however, that the issue of change was not properly explained by the new institutionalists.

It was understandable in light of the fact that the main thrust of the institutionalist approach was to contradict traditional organizational theory which, informed by rational choice theory, was based on the assumption that change was an organizational norm. Stability, not change, was the norm, claimed the institutionalists.

Powell's (1991) defense did not fully answer this criticism; he claimed that change must be treated as an exception rather than as a rule. Although this insistence on stability over change can be seen as part of the provocative program of the new institutionalism, a further glimpse into the roots of the 'old' institutionalism can be revealing. Institutionalism's philosophical roots are usually be traced back to the Chicago school of pragmatism, especially to George Herbert Mead (Aboulaflia, 2001). Two of the authors who inspired Mead's understanding of the social world were the European psychologist, Wilhelm Wundt, and the US psychologist, James Watson, one of the founders of behaviorism. The only dissension between Mead and Watson was over the fact that the symbolic meaning of communication was not included in Watson's behaviorism. Thus Watson's approach, according to Mead, failed to incorporate what was truly human. They agreed, however, that institutions were 'natural' systems, and thus stable (see also Scott, 1981).

Was this conception wrong? Of course not – unless we permit the existence of supernatural forces, all we know is natural. Culture, like people and everything else, is the product of nature. This does not give us an explanatory apparatus of any power, however. In such light, population ecology would be the only theory that made sense. Unfortunately, this type of explanation did not allow the Scandinavians to interpret what they were repeatedly witnessing in the field: that, although 'planned change' never fully succeeds, people do persuade each other to change their opinions, beliefs, and ways of acting – and not only by mistake. The results are paradoxical: planned change stabilizes,

whereas routines create novelty by faulty reproduction.²

This acknowledged ambiguity of change was the focus of what we called a Scandinavian institutionalism. It can be said to have originated in the works of Johan Olsen and Nils Brunsson (see e.g. Olsen, 1970, 1989; Brunsson and Olsen, 1993). Many examples can be found in edited volumes such as Scott and Christensen, 1995; Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996, 2003, 2005; or special issues of *American Behavioral Scientist*, edited by Christensen, Karnøe, Pedersen, and Dobbin (1997) and Westenholtz, Pedersen, and Dobbin (2006). Born mainly in contact with the US new institutionalists, the Scandinavian institutionalism nevertheless reached for additional sources of inspiration, to be able to address the issue of change more fully. Change *and* stability together were seen as an organizational norm, and the logic of appropriateness as complementary to the logic of consequentiality.

Describing organizations as a combination of change and stability assumed a paradoxicality in organizational life (in tune with Luhmann's theory of autopoietic systems – see Luhmann, 1986; and Seidl and Becker, 2005). The dynamic focus has been maintained; the processes that attract the attention of researchers are processes of identity formation and deconstruction, rule establishment and rule breaking, institutionalization and deinstitutionalization.

The emphasis on the processes of construction indicates another source of inspiration, which can be traced to the enormous popularity in Scandinavia of the works of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966, 1995; Berger, Berger, and Kellner, 1974; Luckmann, 1978), heirs of Alfred Schütz and his genial combination of European phenomenology and American pragmatism. Considering Mead's influence on US institutionalism (especially visible in the work of John Meyer, Walter Power, and Paul DiMaggio), the bridge was not difficult to assemble. The constructivist version of institution

theory permitted the Scandinavians to continue their tradition of organization studies, consisting of fieldwork with the processual focus. Their main interest remained the question of *how* institutions emerge, change, and vanish – not merely *that* they do. They offered a type of research complementing, on the one hand, largely speculative historical research, such as that of Torstein Veblen, Gabriel Tarde, Thurman Arnold, and Michael Oakeshott;³ and, on the other hand, the statistical studies of the type for which John W. Meyer and his collaborators are famous. Thus Scandinavian research answers the need for micro-studies of institutions, as formulated by Renate Meyer (2006). A growing collection of such studies will soon enable a combination that seems desirable to me: a series of field studies documenting in micro-perspective institutionalization processes that require decades, if not yet centuries.

What is needed, then, is a review of existing local translations of institutionalism. I am certain there are others, but just as Renate Meyer (2006) did not know about the Scandinavian version, I have never heard of them. Revealing and recording them will permit the achievement of two goals: creating a data basis of micro-studies across places and times, and applying institutional theory onto itself. More of this in the second last section.

SOME THINGS MISSING? TECHNOLOGY AND INSTITUTIONS

Supporters of numerous variations of social constructivism engaged in a fight against scientific realism try to demonstrate that people, not nature, construct culture; objects were supposed to be ruled by different laws than meanings are. In such interpretations, organizational life was seen as being rife with spiritual endeavors, and organizational change seemed to be a change in symbols and metaphors. The result was an unfortunate debate around the question of whether or not those ‘symbolic changes’ were accompanied

by ‘real changes,’ thus maintaining an unnecessarily dualist view of organizations and producing an unintended impression that symbolic changes are ‘unreal’ (for a critique of such dualism, see Gagliardi, 2006).

Studies of science and technology, such as those by Latour and Woolgar (1979/1986), Callon (1986), Callon and Latour (1981), and Knorr-Cetina (1981, 1994), revealed that objects and facts are socially constructed as much as symbols are; that all human knowledge is social; and that, as much as it is sensible and practical to believe that things exist even when nobody looks at them, it can never be ‘proven’ or ‘demonstrated’ that they exist. Thus the adjective ‘social’ as in ‘social constructivism’ is obviously redundant. The point is that, in spite of the appearances of stability and many stabilizing mechanisms, among which is the emergence of institutions, the reality is under constant construction. In tune with Tarde’s postulates, but to the irritation of natural scientists, students of science and technology have also demonstrated that the practice of natural science is much closer to that of social sciences and humanities than anyone suspected.

At the same time, the Society/Nature dichotomy was taken for granted in organization studies as in most social science, causing notorious problems when confronting technology. Scholars in the Tavistock tradition (e.g. Rice, 1958; Woodward, 1965) tried to fill the gap by introducing the notion of *socio-technical* systems. Yet conceptual energy was focused on the ‘socio-,’ and the notion remained firmly dualistic. The concept was revived by some authors during sociology’s turn to technology throughout the 1980s (e.g. Mayntz, 1988; T. E. Burns and Dietz, 1991), but primarily within the same dichotomizing spirit, even if the ‘socio-’ part of the term was enriched by notions of technological design and regulation. Contingency theory within organization theory started from a Tavistock perspective (Burns and Stalker, 1961), but ended by actually excluding physical technology through abstracting the notion of technology into task

structures of various kinds. And the new institutionalism kept the distinction between 'institutional environments' and 'technical environments' (Meyer and Scott, 1981), a clear echo of the traditional distinction between administration and industry, but problematic at a time when administration is run by computers, and engineering follows management fads. A need for dispensing with the dichotomy can be seen in the following quote from Goodman and Sproull (1990), who concluded their overview of the organization technology studies in the 1980s with:

While there appears to be a movement to focus primarily on technology as socially constructed, we feel that some balance is necessary. There are issues that concern technology as a physical reality. These have not been well addressed and have implications for doing work on technology and organizations. ... We feel that a fruitful approach would be to increase our understanding of both the social and the physical aspects of technology ... The real contribution, however, will be understanding the intersection between both forms of reality. (1990: 260–261)

One such contribution could be found in those approaches to science and technology research in which nonhuman components were conceptualized as social subjects of action and as autonomous political actors (Callon, 1988; Latour, 1996). Bernward Joerges and I (1998) thought that technologies were better conceived of as institutionalized organizing patterns than as organizational members. Trust in machinery is 'system trust' (Giddens, 1990), as distinct from personal trust. In other words, we extended to organizations Latour's (1992) argument that 'technology is society made durable.' Technology makes organizing durable, thus contributing to the institutional stability of one of its products – the modern organization – and through it many others. What is more, this process is circular; modern organizations, as users of machines for producing machines and other artifacts, have the task of inscribing institutional order into matter.

By envisioning organizations as action nets transcending face-to-face interactions (Czarniawska, 2004), it is easy to see that the existence of any such action net requires a stable lock into large technical systems. The telephone connects to satellite-based global telecommunications systems, the toaster to integrated electricity grids fed with nuclear energy, and wrist watches to a technical system called World Time. These ubiquitous technical systems and their countless terminals are easily overlooked by the layperson and the organization theorist. Where does water come from? From the tap, of course.

Joerges and I introduced the argument that, through time, various institutional responsibilities have been partially transferred to machine technologies, and therefore partially removed from everyday awareness (Joerges and Czarniawska, 1998). As organized actions are externalized in machines, and as these machines grow more and more complicated, norms and practices of organizing progressively devolve into society's material base; inscribed in machines, institutions are literally 'black-boxed' (Whitley, 1972). As a result, 'technical norms' or 'rules of technology,' although they regulate and order social life, remain absent from the attention of social scientists. Social scientists are interested in *social* norms; technical norms have, until recently, remained within the purview of engineers. Two things have happened recently, however: A series of catastrophes has reintroduced material technology as a central concern in organization studies (see e.g. Barry Turner, 1978/1997; Perrow, 1984; Weick, 1988; Vaughan, 1990; Shrivastava, 1993; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2001); and there is a growing interest among organization scholars in science and technology studies (see e.g. Czarniawska and Hernes, 2005), especially in the computer industry (see e.g. Lanzara and Mörner, 2005).

In order to get closer to the institutional norms inscribed in the machines, one must observe technical things functioning in their 'natural' – that is, social – contexts. Again,

computers offer the most obvious examples, within and outside of organizations. When we start the new PC we just bought, a smiling face will welcome us and let us know what we are supposed to do, via a step-by-step action program. For those of us who have bought many a PC over the years, it comes as no surprise to see that the instructor in the program is no longer a man and the learner a woman; the virtual world does its best to follow the rules of political correctness, with mixed results (Gustavsson and Czarniawska, 2004).

Thus even such cases of intentional personal control are instances of *institutional control*. The controlling power of technical norms stems from the fact that a given practice has been incorporated into an artifact and therefore seems impossible to question. Technology is one of the ways in which society controls itself, socializes its members by unobtrusive measures, and thereby constantly re-constructs itself.

Treating technical norms as social norms of a particular kind does not imply a determinist connection between the content of the technical and nontechnical norms they may or may not promote. A computer in a matriarchal society would probably speak with a female voice, but it would still be recruited into supporting as well as subverting the dominant institutional order. Rather than unmasking particular power games or positing deterministic structural relationships, the idea that institutions are inscribed in technology calls for something like an 'ethnomethodology of machines.' What social order does the dialogue with our computers follow, and try to instill in us?

Technical norms are the institutional structure of machinery. As such, they are inscribed by organizations: Inscriptions made by non-organized agents (graffiti, a handwritten label on a homemade dish) are not legitimate technical norms. Furthermore, technical norms contain an explicit or implicit reference to some quantitative measure. In our article, Joerges and I enumerated three subgenres of technical norms that we

saw as being interrelated. We related them to other, nontechnical genres of inscription: norms for human action, machine behavior, and the natural environment.

The first subgenre contains norms for *human action*, defining human rights and duties vis-à-vis a machine or some other material artifact: 'Turn bottle cap clockwise.' The second subgenre has norms for *machine behavior*: DIN A4, for example, the standard-sized page for European copying machines; or 220 V, the regulation voltage in Europe. Such norms prescribe the way specific technical artifacts are to be constructed and how they are to function. The third subgenre consists of such norms for the *natural environment* as emission and immission limits for SO² air pollution or the nitrate content of groundwater.

These examples show that technical norms are embedded in a complicated mesh of institutions. All three types of norms are specified by various prescriptions for measuring and testing and are, in general, connected to a multitude of interrelated procedural norms. In addition, technical norms are always referring back to nontechnical ones.

Organizations establish and maintain technical norms in relation to the environmental technical norms, as well as norms for users and producers like themselves. Furthermore, technical norms always evoke manifold references to nontechnical institutionalized rules and cultural symbols (gender equality for example). As mentioned, the process is circular. Each machine norm implies a producer and a user norm, and each producer and user norm alludes to a machine norm. Similarly, each type of norm reflects certain normative images present in the wider context, and vice versa. These interconnections are best revealed in cases in which artifacts are moved outside the institutional context of their production, as documented by the anthropologists' sense of wonder over the possible uses of Coca-Cola® cans in some cultures (Sahlins, 2001).

The divisions among the three types of technical norms are in no way unambiguous.

In fact, their attribution to one class or the other may be controversial, and in this sense may remove their taken-for-grantedness. Blurring genres and redefining their boundaries is an affair of politics ('Who are those computer guys to tell me what to do?'), jokes ('Be nice to your computer, or else!'), and experimentation ('Let's see if we can use it this way instead'). In the everyday life of organizations, all three blend, and the effects of that blending are pragmatically decided; for some purposes it is important to keep them apart, for others, to blend them. Organizational actors may or may not problematize their contents, form, or sheer existence, but researchers must. Technology ought to become an interesting topic for the institutionalists, precisely because technical norms tend to operate outside the awareness of their habitual followers. Smoothly and reliably prescribed machine operations become sealed off from representations of organizational life, and, by the same token, the constitutive parts of the action nets represented by the concept of 'organization' remain invisible, and are not given a voice in organizational accounts.

SOMETHING COULD BE ADDED: A NARRATIVE INSTITUTIONALISM?

My interest in narratology brought another field with a developed theory of institutions to my attention: literary theory (see e.g. Zeraffa, 1973; Bruss, 1976, 1982). Thus the idea of arranging an encounter between a narrative approach and the new institutionalism (Czarniawska, 1997) was based on the hope that the combination could lead to greater metaphorical clarity in both. In what follows, I neglect narratology in order to concentrate on institutional theory, which must not be seen as a proof that it is only institutionalism that can benefit from the encounter (for a reverse example, see e.g. Gumbrecht, 1992, applying Luhmann's theory to literature). However, I believe that proponents of

the new institutionalism, in order to live up to their mission of explaining the social character of the organizational world, need to reflect on their own metaphors.

The issue at stake is much more than metaphorical purism. It is possible to translate the physical metaphors of new institutionalism into literary categories as well as the other way around, each time producing some sort of creative displacement.⁴ In the case at hand, however, the replacement of physical metaphors by cultural ones may finally remove the assumption of stability that sneaked into the new institutionalism, acknowledge the interplay between intentions and contingencies, and permit self-reflection.

I return to the notion of institutional isomorphism, as explicated in the original DiMaggio and Powell article from 1983. This notion assumes the homogenization of an organization field due to coercive pressures, mimetic processes, and normative pressures. Later comments by Powell (1991), written in reply to various criticisms, addressed the sources of heterogeneity, albeit treating it merely as a type of error variance. The introduction to Powell and DiMaggio (1991) took a more generous view of the possibility that homogenization may be accompanied by heterogenization, but it was also more abstract than the specific original wording, thus making it impossible to judge if they actually changed their minds or were merely placating their critics.

This problem is not as troublesome once the metaphors are exchanged. In genre theory,⁵ which is the institutional theory of literature, the sources of homogeneity and heterogeneity are the same. The result may veer to one side or another temporarily and locally; what is more, because no 'thermostats' are fitted, the imbalance can lead to the extinction of a genre or to its temporary dominance over others. No predictions of the kind 'If A then B ...' can or need be made. But an understanding of the dynamics can be attempted, because the coercive pressures or attempts to use power to establish the superiority

of one genre over another invariably produce *counter-narratives* and *subversive genres*. Thus one could claim that the Académie Française promoted freedom of expression in French art; that the increasing control of positivism revealed the strength of symbolist approaches; and that the bureaucratic orders of central administrations produce bursts of creative avoidance activities. The emergence of institutions is always rife with paradoxes.

Mimetic processes become much more complex, as well, when interpreted in terms of *fashion* (a social phenomenon) rather than individual imitation (Czarniawska, 2005). The concept of fashion, conceived in the way Tarde (1890/1962) and Simmel (1904/1973) understood it, combines a striving to conform with a striving to be original. The municipalities espousing yet more reforms and changes are afraid of being left alone ('What if everybody else reforms?') and are proud of being *avant-garde* ('We were there before anybody else').

Finally, normative (professional) pressures may be the most ambiguous of all. On the other hand they were described in DiMaggio and Powell (1983) as idealistic and at variance with social realities; and on the other, as hierarchical, authoritarian, and akin to coercive pressures. The narrative version of institutionalism needs no more than corroborate this ambiguity. Within professional environments, there is always a simultaneous pressure to adhere to tradition and to rebel against it, to create new traditions and to follow the conventional way of doing things.

Additionally, genre theory reveals interplay between intentionality and field forces that is hardly visible in the 'institutional isomorphism' version of events. Literary works can be and are consciously constructed, but it does not mean that the intentions of the readers will ever approximate the intentions of the authors or that a text can be intentionally created as an exemplar – a beginning of a new genre ordered by fiat. Once a pattern begins to emerge, actors try to appropriate it, give it a name, translate it for their own needs,

construct their identity around it – *authorize* it, as it were. Once again, the reaction of the readers – or the spectators – may be acceptance or rejection.

All these contradictions may be connected with a paradox that seems to be inherent in institutionalism, at least in its constructivist version (Sismondo, 1993 used Berger and Luckmann, 1966 as an example). On the one hand, the *construction* of institutions implies and demands a proactive vision of human actors busying themselves with plotting, performing, and accounting for what they do, and thus producing reality as they know it. On the other hand, the notion of institutions suggests *accretion*, a passive process under no one's control – something that just happens.

For Sismondo, this is a historical accident, a somewhat unreflective combination of two different thought traditions, which is obviously 'wrong.' There is no point in insisting that it be corrected, however. For me, it opens a vast area of possibilities, *because* and not in spite of its lack of coherence. Is not a fuller, richer picture of knowledge and reality being created by this emphasis on a combination of plots and intentions, which produces unintentional but powerful changes? According to this reading, even institutionalism and the rational model can complement each other. The rational model promotes change and the illusion of controllability, which, according to Luhmann (1986), is necessary to keep the system going. The institutional response is that the change happens only within the frames permitted by the institutional thought structure; and observations confirm this view, insofar as it concerns planned change. But the changes are many, and truly radical ones are, by definition, unpredictable; although it could be claimed that the probability of such radical changes would be smaller if all planned change ceased to exist.

'Looking at the system from the outside' is a metaphorical, paradoxical attempt in Escherian spirit, as Luhmann repeatedly stated in his writings. Thus it does not make sense, from this imaginary travel to the

outside, to make ‘predictions’ or to form ‘recommendations for action,’ which can be used ‘inside.’ ‘It is not the task of an external observer to de-paradoxize the system and describe it in a way that is suitable for multi-level logical analysis’ (Luhmann, 1986: 179). What our imaginary ‘vision from outside’ says is that the system survives, thanks to its fictions – its illusions of selection, rational choice, and intentionality – combined with complexity and with the knowledge of closeness, repetition, and self-reflection.

Pointing out the ‘iron cage’ of institutions, DiMaggio and Powell failed to see what Luhmann has been emphasizing all along. Of course it is an iron cage, but it ‘functions’ well, as long as people inside believe that they are free. ‘The autopoiesis does not stop in [the] face of logical contradictions: it jumps, provided that possibilities of further communication are close enough at hand’ (Luhmann, 1986: 180). It would be unfair to claim that the new institutionalists are unaware of this paradox, but many try to deparadoxize their theory – an unnecessary feat, given that a theory describing paradoxes does not have to be paradoxical itself. Neither does it have to exclude paradoxes at all costs; in general, it does not have to imitate the system it describes. Such an ‘anthropological approach toward social ideas,’ as Thurman Arnold (1935: 30) called it, is not supposed to lead to ‘a logically formulated set of principles’ (1935: 30), which some new institutionalists try to develop. Neither should it demand that the system it observes should stop producing such principles: ‘It is the system under examination which can no more help producing principles than a hen can keep from laying eggs’ (Arnold, 1935: 30).

Karl E. Weick’s (1979) description of the world of organizations was similar to Arnold’s, with the added mechanism of ‘loose coupling,’ which permitted different and even contradictory subsystems to coexist peacefully under the same label and under the same organizational roof. Brunsson

(1985, 1989), inspired by Arnold (1935) and by Meyer and Rowan (1977), who spoke about rationalist decision façades and action-oriented practices, postulated hypocrisy as a joining mechanism; March and Olsen (1989) spoke of ‘healthy hypocrisy.’

Many new institutionalist works, however, steer away from such solutions and return to Arnold’s dilemma, doing precisely what, in his opinion, made no sense: formulating their observations about the paradoxical nature of the system in a language of one of the subsystems – the one that forbids paradoxicality. Perhaps this need to formalize and formulate predictions is connected with the trap of institution-maintenance that lies in wait for every institutionalist. Genres and other institutions presuppose permanence (an institution is a practice that lasts) and difference (an institution must be different and differentiable from other institutions). Such a statement is apparently in perfect congruence with the stationary assumptions of the new institutionalism.

DON’T GO TOO FAR; TURN AROUND AND TAKE A LOOK

As long as a genre or an institution is used properly – for classification – this is not a problem. ‘Any public tends to classify what it receives and to receive it through a classification of everything that it has received before’ (Lejeune, 1989: 147). This is what the concept of the ‘institutional thought structure’ (Warren, Rose, and Bergunder, 1974) was all about.

The possible transgressions are two. One is to attempt to construct a complete theory, as Northrop Frye (1957/1990) tried within genre theory. Lejeune’s (1989: 152) critique was firm: ‘To elaborate “a theory of genres” is to try to formulate a synthesis in the absolute by making use of concepts that make sense only in the historical field’ (Lejeune, 1989: 152). As mentioned, this danger has

been avoided, at least in DiMaggio and Powell's tolerant presentations of a variety of institutional theories.

The other risk is that the phenomenon in the focus of reflection – the unproblematic (because it is institutionalized) use of classificatory devices – re-occurs within the reflection itself. One solution to this problem is to place oneself and one's analysis in the closed system that is being depicted, as the genre analysts often do. The narrative angle makes self-reflection easier, in view of the observation that theoretical narratives are produced within the same institutional thought structure as the narratives of the field. Seeing one's theory as a narrative among many (or, in case of institutional theory, a genre among others) can help to locate it institutionally. Otherwise, the theoreticians are doomed to including a blind spot in their theory, which covers their own position in it.

Lack of self-reflection is not a trait of the new institutionalism alone. The 'old' institutionalists also took the notion of one institution for granted: the institution of social science research. Even sociologists of knowledge, such as Berger and Luckmann, assumed that their task was to study everyone else – that sociology itself can be studied only by philosophy (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). One could argue, however, that the 'old' institutionalism was born in harmony with its institutional environment, in the sense that its ideas blended well into the mainstream of its time. Not so the new institutionalism, somewhat in opposition to the present mainstream in social sciences, and appearing to try to appease the institutional core by sacrificing its traditional methods, which were close to those of anthropology. The result, however, seems sometimes not so much paradoxical as confused. Many studies report straightforward statistical analyses. Surely it is the task of an institutionalist to explore the way statistics are built and used, and not to take them as 'facts',⁶ 'revealing regularities'? Many contributions contain predictions and formalizations. How can this be reconciled with the pragmatist-constructivist assumptions

behind the institutionalist ideas? Why should one attempt to formalize a world undergoing construction?

There is always the possibility of alternating between the position of an observer and that of the actor – in this case as observers of and actors in social science. Thus I end as I began: with a plea for an institutional account of institutional theory.

NOTES

1 Roine Johansson limits this development to Sweden (Johansson, 2002).

2 Paul DiMaggio's (1988) view of the temporality of every institutional order is close to this idea, but is more conflict oriented.

3 According to Ernest Gellner, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the foundation of LSE, Oakeshott and Gellner quarreled, Gellner arguing that 70 years is long enough to speak of the establishment of an institution, and Oakeshott arguing that it requires at least 200 years (Gellner, 1980). I am on Oakeshott's side, as the recent changes in Russia have demonstrated; 70 years is not enough to change an institutional order.

4 The very distinction between 'physical' and 'cultural' metaphors is tenuous. As mentioned, Tarde saw diffusion as a cultural process, whereas biologists speak of both diffusion (a movement of a substance from an area of high concentration to an area of lower concentration) and translation (of messenger RNA in a bacterium *E.coli*, for example). The term 'translation', as used in the sociology of translation, is also nonlinguistic (Steve Brown, 2002).

5 Genres are sets of rules and conventions governing expectations about the length and compositional structure of communicative acts, but also ways of conceptualizing reality, forms of seeing and interpreting particular aspects of the world. I am referring here to dynamic genre theories, such as those developed by Bakhtin (1979/2000) and Bruss (1982).

6 'Facts, as telescopes and wigs for gentlemen, were a seventeenth century invention' (MacIntyre, 1988:357).

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