

Overture. Institutions and thoughts toward a creative interchange

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Abstract

In this text I discuss the relationship between institutions and the mind as it has been developed in the socio-economic literature and in the psychoanalytic literature of Bionian matrix. Moreover, I identify “thinkability” as the complementary background of this monothematic volume of *Funzione Gamma* and I suggest some of its possible functions.

Key words: thinkability, representation, creativity, reciprocity, participation

My interest in institutions started with the history of economic thought, at the intersection between economics and sociology. In this field of knowledge, theory is built upon the fictional hypothesis of individuals with specific cognitive capacities but apparently little, if any, space for emotions and affectivity.

This stream of study places strong confidence in the existence of a bidirectional exchange between institutions and the mind that is rooted in the cognitive characteristics of social subjects.

Two key statements of this, in itself variegated, approach are relevant here:

1. Institutions depend on how the mind functions and they often resolve (compensate for) specific cognitive limitations;
2. Institutions play at least two simultaneous roles in the social arena: they define boundaries to human activity but also set opportunities for social interchange.

The Nobel Laureates in Economics Friedrich von Hayek and Herbert Simon, both committed to interdisciplinary research, set the basis on which contemporary literature has developed further contributions to this approach.

As Hayek (1952) suggests, on the one hand the institutional dimension appears to be a constraint, which is internalised by individuals in terms of boundaries and rules (for example, it helps define what can be effectively done and what cannot). On the other, institutions consolidate specific traits of external reality by making them more stable and comprehensible.

For Hayek, institutions are thus both a signal and a source of social stability that emerge from two epistemic problems. The first concerns the impossibility of fully explaining mental activity. As the mind is our only source of understanding, it can never be a completely external object of analysis. Rather, our knowledge is a set of dispositions and expectations about the world, which are intrinsically mind dependent. The second, and related, implication is that not all human knowledge is conscious and thus verbally transferable. Much of it is actually difficult to articulate explicitly (Hayek, 1967). The spontaneous evolution of institutions is rooted in these cognitive aspects. Due to the fact that part of individual knowledge is tacit, institutions, such as the market and its price structures, act as signals of cognitive content which could not be communicated otherwise. In this way, the institutional structure helps in making private, incomplete and unconscious information “socially usable” (Horwitz, 2000).

In addition to this primary function, informal institutions, such as norms or rules of behaviour, also help mutual co-ordination among agents, by coordinating expectations. As the mind cannot fully know either itself or others' minds, market relationships require prolonged interaction through which individuals learn how to co-ordinate with each other. In this context, behavioural patterns that emerge and consolidate, thus becoming consuetudinary, facilitate interaction by making the behaviour of any agent predictable to the others (Hayek, 1978).

From a similar perspective, Simon also considered the relationship between information, knowledge and institutions as critical. Due to the fact that the mental capacities of individuals are limited compared to the complexity of their decisional context, following social rules may be a simple and satisfactory way of behaving. Moreover, the agent that makes decisions needs to act in a relatively static and predictable environment. The main role played by institutional patterns is precisely that of simplifying the process of forecasting by providing a source of reliable expectations upon which decision making may be based (Simon, 1958).

These approaches have been articulated further through the common work of economists, sociologists and cognitive scientists that has gained growing consensus in recent decades.

According to the historian Douglass North, Nobel Laureate for Economics in 1994, an articulated relationship exists between institutions and the cognitive structure of individuals, whose conceptual pivot is the notion of a "mental model". In North's words, "the relationship between mental models and institutions is an intimate one. Mental models are the internal representations that individual cognitive systems create to interpret the environment; institutions are the external (to the mind) mechanisms individuals create to structure and order the environment" (1994, p. 363). Mental models are seen as "flexible knowledge structures" (ibid, p. 3) which develop over time to organise experience that is based on perceptions and memories. They allow individuals to face problematic situations by offering them an interpretative key of environmental complexity.

Moreover, they have an important social dimension. Shared mental models represent the cognitive basis on which institutions are created and legitimised in order to solve social problems. From this perspective, for institutions to be established, it is necessary to have a common mental representation both of the problem that society wants to face and of the solutions that are considered acceptable at the social level.

Notwithstanding the appeal of these formulations that have inspired many interdisciplinary intersections, I never found them fully satisfactory. In my view, they lack something crucial that does not fit into the notions of mental models, cognitive structure or rationality. Something that I consider more typically human, that has to do with vitality.

My impression is based on the idea that many theories on institutions explain why we need them, what institutions can do for us and what they prevent us from doing, but fail to say anything about how, and if, our relationship with institutions can be either creative, or daunting.

This is a crucial aspect because social structure, and institutions among them, can exert a truly significant role for us only if we manage to feel involved in their functioning. Let me clarify this point further. Society is something that we find, at our birth, already there. It waits for us and precedes us. It also gives us the instruments, socially recognised and legitimised, to live with others. But we can be part of society only if we wish to participate in its construction. Such a feeling, in its turn, requires an interchange between what has already been done, settled and decided by others, and what we may add, from our partial, limited and personal view point.

My experience with the book “Fare gruppo nelle istituzioni”, reviewed by Luciana Zecca at the end of this volume, strengthened this idea further.

While working with Claudio Neri on the project for this book, I met people that work within institutions and dedicate passion and enthusiasm to a job which is often less organised and less well paid than a private one. I also spoke to many who feel frustrated and resented by a work place that doesn't even “see” them. What makes the difference between these two situations is the feeling of being part of the institution, the opposite of being excluded. Exclusion does not necessarily take the form of explicit redundancy. More subtly, it can consist of marginalisation, lack of empathy and emotional deafness: the individual is present but irrelevant.

In order to feel included in an institution, a contract and a formal role are not sufficient. Instead, personal involvement is needed. How can this sense of participation be achieved?

The concept of “thinkability” developed by Bion, seemed very helpful in this respect, for it requires the establishment of a dynamic and constantly refreshed relationship between the individual and what can be “thought” by him. As is well known, for Bion, “thinking is a development forced on the psyche by the pressure of thoughts and not the other way round” (1962, p. 179). Thoughts create the mind if they meet the apparatus for “thinking” or dealing with them.

By following this perspective, we may interpret institutions as “thoughts without thinkers” that wait to be “appropriated” and then thought by individuals (Neri, 2015). If institutions become thoughts “in the mind”, they also become a source from which the individual can learn: the basis for an active and affective interaction is established, institutions are felt as living objects with which a dynamic relationship can be established and in which the individual is involved.

This virtual cycle requires, however, some preliminary conditions.

Bion argues that thoughts can be classified into pre-conceptions, conceptions, and concepts. If a pre-conception, for instance the expectation of a breast, “is brought into contact with a realisation that approximates to it, the mental outcome is a conception” (1962, p. 179) that is linked with an emotional experience of satisfaction.

For Bion, thinking develops when a conception, such as a baby's knowledge about the existence of the breast, comes up against the realisation that there is no breast available to provide satisfaction. In this situation, if the infant is able to sufficiently tolerate frustration, the absence of the breast becomes a thought that consists of a representation of the breast in its absence.

Thus, for the breast to be “thought of”, the following requirements are needed:

1. An imperfect fit between what the baby expects and what he finds must be postulated;
2. The infant must tolerate a certain amount of frustration;
3. When conditions 1 and 2 have been met, the “thought” of the breast can begin to develop in the infant’s internal world. However, another requirement is still very important in order to guarantee that personal trust in the efficacy of thinking is maintained: sooner or later, the breast has to arrive. If the breast arrives at a certain point, the baby will develop the idea that his thoughts about the breast in absence have been useful, that they have exerted a positive effect on reality by making the breast present. Instead, if this were not the case, if the baby were left alone with an unbearable and unresolved frustration, personal trust in thinking would gradually fade (Parthenope Bion, 1987).

If the breast is thought of, and then it arrives, the baby will learn to think the absent breast and also, he will attach to this thought a positive, creative effect.

I want to suggest that this mental situation can be interpreted as a sort of “ticket to participate”: it contains the possibility to establish a relationship with a desired breast in which two poles, both active although asymmetric, can be identified: the mother and the child. Most importantly, if the baby can feel confident in his thinking activity, he can also exit the condition of a passive entity, entirely dependent on the mother. Indeed, he is confident that the breast, now absent, will then arrive because he is thinking of it and his thoughts will be “seen”.

For institutions to become vital thoughts in the mind of individuals, similar conditions must apply. In particular, three requirements seem fundamental:

- The individual has to accept that institutions are not the idealised entities that satisfy his expectations wholly: indeed, a divergence between what he expects and what he gets in the social realm is the most common outcome;
- The individual must tolerate this divergence without escaping into a negative idealisation or trapping himself in defensive forms of behaviour, such as marginalising his participation or looking for a different institution to be in relation with;
- The institution must “see” the subject and his requests, sooner or later. In other words, it must think the subject besides being thought by him, it must take him into consideration and offer him a space.

When these conditions are met, thinkability develops in a reciprocal modality. As for the breast, the social agent will not feel fully dependent on the dictatorship of external facts. On the one hand, institutions that are not ideal will be thought of in his mind; on the other, these institutions will not be deaf or blind. They will participate in the interaction as limited, imperfect but living entities. On the contrary, when thinkability does not develop, or is not bidirectional, pathologic outcomes will colonise the social arena.

Thinkability can be interpreted as the opportunity to be part of what was already there, prior to our arrival, was established and developed without our participation but is still

able to wait for us, insert us in its texture, give a space to our specific, idiosyncratic contribution. This appears to me as the basis for a creative relationship with institutions: a bidirectional capacity to adapt to each other in order to provide reciprocal containment but also personal appropriation and transformation.

Developmental psychology echoes this idea from a different perspective.

As Lawrence and Valsiner have suggested (1993, 2003), socialisation with others does not imply stamping social influence on a blank slate but rather the personal development of a new mental plane in which external messages are interpreted from an idiosyncratic viewpoint. If this mechanism works well, the transformation of social messages from one individual to the other, from one generation to the other, prevails over transmission. On the one hand, social-institutional structures constrain the development of individuals by providing ways of interpreting events and forming expectations that the individual has not chosen but found. On the other, agents internalise what is out there, think of social messages and reinterpret them through personal affective and cognitive structures. Only through such a process of intense work can they return a personal product back to society and be paid by the feeling of being involved in the development of a shared social texture (Patalano, 2013).

The interaction with institutions should develop in the same way: only when the institutions/thoughts that are among people find a thinker who can contribute to them and take the thinker into consideration this interaction can be creative, which is to say, it can provide active transformation of social contents, rather than mechanic transmission. In the subtle discrepancy between transformation and transmission, our opportunity to participate consolidates, or fades.

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