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Understanding Institutional Endurance: The Role of Dynamic Form, Harmony and Rhythm in Institutions

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With this article I want to contribute to a more adequate explanation of institutional endurance. I argue that current explanations in the neo-institutionalist literature suffer from two problems. The first is a rational-cognitive bias coupled with an overemphasis of the role of actors. The second is the unexplained source of autonomy and externality in the definition of institutions. I propose to solve these problems by introducing an aesthetic perspective on institutional endurance. This perspective should not replace but supplement existing models and theories. The aesthetic perspective conceptualises institutions as social processes with aesthetic qualities such as harmony and rhythm. These aesthetic qualities can be felt and perceived resulting in a positive or negative experience of the institution that, in turn, promotes its reproduction (or not).

Keywords: institutional endurance, feelings, perceptions, harmony, rhythm, pleasure, cognitivist bias, externality, autopoiesis

“Institutions endure.” (Start of Clemens & Cook, 1999)

Drawing on a variety of authors (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Fligstein, 2001; Friedland, 2009b; Giddens, 1993; Jepperson, 1991), I propose as a starting definition that institutions are processes establishing regimes of valuation through shared rules and meanings without requiring repeated collective mobilization and authoritative intervention. They are historical accretions of past practices that are of major significance to a society and have the greatest space-time extension compared with all other social phenomena. In fact, this last, temporal, characteristic seems to be the only one every scholar studying institutions can agree on. As Zucker (1977:726) states: “The only idea common to all usages of the term ‘institution’ is that of some sort of establishment of relative permanence of a distinctly social sort”. Examples commonly given are marriage, the family, Christianity, Capitalism or democracy.

Even these rather uncontroversial examples point to a problem in the conceptualisation of institutions that has to do with their identity over time. For although “marriage” has been around for a very long time, the contractual marriages of Roman or early medieval law were quite different from the (Catholic) sacramental marriages dominating Europe from the High Middle Ages to the 20th century. Questions regarding the possibility of divorce, the required age of the spouses, their gender or the issue of consent have been answered differently over the centuries and are still answered differently in different cultures. What, then, permits us to speak of “marriage” in all of these cases and to assert its endurance as an institution? What do we mean when we say that institutions “endure”? The next section is dedicated to answers from the institutionalist literature. It shows how various authors have explained the phenomenon of institutional endurance and notes the implications these explanations have for the definition of institutions.

Institutional definitions and the problem of endurance: A review of the literature

Four explanations

The four most often cited reasons for institutional endurance are taken-for-grantedness, sensemaking, energy saving and active intervention. There is, however, no straightforward match between these explanations and the various sub-strands of institutionalist theory. Authors will often use more than one explanation in their arguments.

The first account refers to the historical and/or longitudinal nature of the institutionalisation process. It claims that institutions were actively constructed at some point in the past, but then this active construction became forgotten and subsequent generations of actors came to accept the institution as external and taken-for-granted (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Zucker, 1987). The idea also forms the basis of power-related accounts in the tradition of Bourdieu (1990), where institutions are perceived as “naturalised” or latent (Patriotta & Lanzara, 2006), as well as of imprinting theory (Johnson, 2007) and path dependency theories (Sydow, Schreyögg, & Koch, 2009). In all these cases, endurance is a result of a neglect to consider or intervene as people do not perceive alternatives to their actions.

The second account refers to the idea that institutions are needed as an input for sensemaking and identity construction (Clemens & Cook, 1999; DiMaggio, 1997; Glynn, 2008; Jepperson, 2002; Meyer, 2008; Patriotta & Lanzara, 2006; Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003; Weber & Glynn, 2006), for social categories (Lounsbury & Rao, 2004; Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2005; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008), subject positions and bodies of knowledge (Maguire & Hardy, 2009). Here, institutional reproduction is necessary so that people do not go insane as it is institutions that form the backdrop against which sense and identity are constituted.

The third account assumes a universal human tendency to save energy in interaction by devising routines and habits (Douglas, 1987). This strand plays an important role in Berger and Luckmann's theory, too, where typifications become habitualised because they "free energy" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967:53). Endurance thus becomes the result of (unconscious) acts of simplification in a complex social world.

A fourth account, finally, looks at active interventions to maintain or defend institutions in crisis. This account is closely related to the institutional work perspective (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009; Micelotta & Washington, 2013; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013) but also plays a role wherever incumbents actively defend the status quo. According to this account, actors have a more or less clear understanding that their actions will contribute to the endurance of the institution, for example when they volunteer to count votes in a democratic election.

The rational-cognitive bias

In all these accounts, actors are quite "active". Whether they typify-and-forget, make sense and identify with, create routines, categorise or gain knowledge, police or defend, human actors are invariably at the centre of attention. At the same time, the institution as the object of study is often cut to manageable size when, instead of family or religion, scholars study the adoption or change of more short-lived practices such as recycling (Lounsbury, Ventresca, & Hirsch, 2003).

A number of authors have criticised the shift in the conceptualisation of institutions towards a (conveniently utilisable) cognitivist and instrumental bias. One strand of this critique maintains that institutions are primarily based on values rather than cognitions. The emphasis on values is very prominent in the "old" institutionalism from Durkheim and Weber to Selznick

but has been taken up more recently by authors such as Friedland or Stinchcombe. Stinchcombe (1997) argues that people's beliefs in rituals, formal procedures and ceremonies are underpinned by a genuine belief in an institution's capacity to provide the right answer. People go along with procedures, he argues, not because these procedures are officially authorised but because people perceive them to be substantively right. In a similar vein, Friedland (2009a, b, 2012, 2013b), rejects the idea of institutions as empty vessels to promote actors' interests. He goes back to Weber's notion of value rationality to argue that institutions are anchored in values and beliefs. To distance himself from the cognitivist institutional logics perspective as developed by Lounsbury, Thornton and Ocasio², and to bring value back into institutional theory, he has coined the notion of "institutional substance". I will come back to this notion later on.

Friedland's second critique of the cognitivist bias revolves around the lack of emotion, passion and desire in neo-institutional theory. Again, this is a concern established at the dawn of institutional theory (Durkheim, 1976) and recently taken up by a number of authors (among others, Creed, Hudson, Okhuysen, & Smith-Crowe, 2014; Voronov, 2014; Voronov & Vince, 2012; Zietsma & Toubiana, 2015) arguing that the "compulsion" that institutional obligations exert on individuals can only be understood through attention to the emotional side of this relationship.

Closely connected to this is another, third, point of critique based on the disregard for the embodied aspects of institutions. Institutions, Stinchcombe (1997) argues, embody values through their rituals. They also take hold of the bodies of individuals and mobilise their energies (Friedland, 2005; Weik, 2012).

² "Just for the record, they have done a creative reading of what they called Robert Alford's and my 'inter-institutional system', in which I sometimes do not recognise my own understanding of these logics." (Friedland, 2012:584)

The externality of institutions and the reification problem

A second major point where institutionalist theory seems to have lost connection to its own roots, is the “externality” of institutions. Berger and Luckmann’s seminal contribution is dedicated to the question of how institutions, through externalisation, objectification and internalisation, become unchangeable and objective regimes *vis-à-vis* the actor. Zucker (1977) also characterises institutionalised acts as objective and exterior. Friedland and Alford (1991), too, talk about the exteriority of institutions. Jepperson (1991) defines institutions as not requiring intervention by actors; and Czarniawska (2009) speaks of actors being able to institute but not institutionalise. In contrast to this, neo-institutionalist scholarship in the contemporary mainstream sings the praises of agency and entrepreneurship in what Suddaby (2010) criticises as a trivialisation of institutional change with elements of contingency theory and change theory (i.e. change as preferred outcome). He defends a “tendency for social structures and processes to acquire meaning and stability *in their own right* rather than as instrumental tools for the achievement of specialised ends” (2010:15, my emphasis) as a core concept of institutional theory.

The agentic focus, however, is a relatively recent phenomenon in institutionalist theory. Earlier accounts often favour a more structural explanation of institutional endurance that is better equipped to deal with the above issues. Clemens and Cook (1999) see institutions as self-sustaining higher-order effects whose self-sustenance is only interrupted by exogenous shocks or when endogenous contradictions become untenable.

Jepperson, too, draws a very clear distinction between institutional and other forms of social reproduction when he claims that institutional reproduction does not require intervention by actors. His famous quote “One enacts institutions; one takes action by departing from them,

not by participating in them“ (Jepperson, 1991:149) takes the stance that action (defined as intervention) has no place in institutional maintenance. In this sense, for example a handshake as part of a conventional greeting, is not an action but conventional participation in an institution. Refusing the handshake, on the other hand, is an action. In the absence of action, institutions “owe their survival to relative self-activating processes” (Jepperson, 1991:145). Unfortunately, Jepperson does not elaborate much on the nature of these self-activating processes. Judging from the examples he gives, they seem to be exclusively located on the structural or macro level, for example when he says that institutions change because they develop contradictions with their environment or with other institutions.

Rejecting the role of agency in a similar manner, Meyer and colleagues (Drori, Meyer, & Hwang, 2009; Meyer, Boli, & Thomas, 1987; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000) argue that actorhood and agency are products of institutions rather than their drivers. They are, more precisely, “cultural system constructs”, not natural entities. In an increasingly rationalised world, these conceptions replace earlier concepts of divine authority and legitimacy and take central stage in our (rationalised) accounts of processes, projects and events. Institutions endure by changing their “actorhood scripts” to accommodate increased demands for rationalisation. Nevertheless, agency remains something that is (only) ascribed to a natural person, collective or idea; and the script for this ascription is produced by institutions.

A common denominator of all these explanations is a certain autopoietic element that describes the central elements of institutional reproduction often with the prefix “self-“, for example as self-policing (Douglas), self-activating (Jepperson), self-regulating (Jepperson) or self-perpetuating (Giddens). One could assume that these terms are just a shorthand for the (lengthy and convoluted) web of individual and collective action. This, however, would seem odd given the rather anti-agentic bias of the approaches. Moreover, we are talking about *definitions* of institutions, in which shorthands or any other form of “as if” talk should have no

place. In contrast, I believe that the “self-...” describes a real phenomenon that has something to do with institutions being “external” to actors but also with institutional endurance. It describes a process that has to a certain extent “a life of its own” and lies beyond actors’ influence.

Describing such a process, however, presents the problem of reification for it is unclear what the “self-“ refers to. Institutional scholar would agree that institutions are not “things”, so what “self” is there that polices, activates, etc.? To avoid the problem, recent scholarship tends to be mute on the ontology of institutions. All this achieves, however, is to push the problem back into the realm of unreflected assumptions for I would hold, with Archer (1988:464), that “we can say nothing without making some assumptions about the nature of the social reality examined”.

THE AISTHETIC PERSPECTIVE

My aesthetic perspective ameliorates the problems sketched above by achieving two things. The first is to keep human actors but steer away from the emphasis on their cognitive faculties. This should prevent images of rational, conscious or logical choice from entering the explanatory frame. Human beings are important for the conceptualisation of institutions, but not as permanent interventionists and not in their decision-making capacity. As speaking, acting, embodied, sensemaking people they co-constitute institutional processes but are not their manufacturers.

The second is to provide a process ontology for the concept of “self-“ that enables us to talk about institutions as active, ordered processes without reifying them. Strong process theory, as discussed below, allows us to distinguish between human intervention and creativity in a

manner that neither requires permanent human intervention for the social world to turn nor requires institutions to become quasi-humans in order to be active.

Nevertheless, it should be stressed throughout that the aesthetic perspective is not intended to replace existing explanations but complement them. Institutional endurance is a complex process, and we would be ill advised to look for single causes. Moreover, shifting the explanatory burden away from human agency does not mean it can never serve as an explanation. There may be cases of institutional design, and there may be cases in which identifiable persons contribute significantly to the maintenance of an institution. I would hold, however, that they are relatively rare.

In what follows, I present the aesthetic perspective by providing some definitions as well as my main thesis. I then discuss the perspective's theoretical home in strong process theory and develop the three major concepts: dynamic form, harmony and rhythm. The first answers the ontological question of how institutions as processes can endure; the latter two the epistemological question of how we can feel these processes. Together they constitute my argument that we can feel institutions immediately and that this feeling, if positive, contributes to their endurance.

Definitions and main thesis

Defining my central concept I prefer the term "aesthetic" over the more common version "aesthetic". Webster's Dictionary (1986:34) defines "aesthetic" as: relating to the beautiful, a synonym for artistic, being appreciative of the beautiful. It also defines it as: relating to

sensuous cognition³, involving pure feeling or sensation, in contrast to ratiocination, and based on immediate, especially sensuous, experience. The word is derived from the Greek noun “aisthesis”, which denotes sense or bodily perception as opposed to pure or conceptual thinking (Hager, 1971). Its philosophical use goes back as far as the Pre-Socratics. For this article, I want to move away from the connotation with art that the word “aesthetic” nowadays carries and focus instead on the epistemological aspect of bodily perception as captured by the last three descriptors in the Webster Definition. It is for this reason that I apply the older version of the word: “aisthetic”.

My thesis is that institutions have aisthetic properties like harmony and rhythm. These properties enable us to feel-perceive institutions immediately. This feeling-perception can explain institutional endurance to the extent that people, as a rule, will seek to maintain what they feel to be pleasurable and avoid what displeases them. The dynamic form of institutions, I argue, allows institutions, once established, to continue without constant human intervention. The process can, however, be interrupted and destroyed by human intervention motivated by displeasure. Pleasure, on the other hand, will mostly “motivate” people to do nothing about the institution while getting on with their daily lives.

It should be noted that although the subsequent argument will focus on pleasure and the endurance of institutions, my point is not that institutions always give us pleasure and endure; I have just adopted this variant of the explanation to present my argument in the space available. Institutions can just as well cause displeasure, which is detrimental to institutional endurance.

The term “feeling-perception” is slightly awkward but necessary to avoid some misleading connotations. “Perception” refers to the uncontroversial fact that we are affected by our

³ In the remainder of the text I will make a more pronounced distinction between cognition and feeling than Webster does. “Cognition” will refer solely to the rational and intellectual aspect of our mental faculties and will therefore stand in juxtaposition to feelings.

surroundings and perceive them in a number of ways. The term “feeling” stresses a particular type of perception, viz. the aesthetic type that I have defined above. “Feeling-perceptions” could hence also be called “aesthetic perceptions”. The hyphenation ensures that, on the one hand, perceptions are not taken to be visual, clear, conceptually precise and/or reflected statements like “I see three blue balls ten feet away from me”, and that, on the other hand, feelings are not to be taken to be synonymous with emotions as “inner states” of joy or sadness but as something that is constituted in the relation between perceiving subject and perceived object: not “I feel sad” but “I feel the hot ground”.

Contextualisation of the perspective: Strong process theory

My perspective is based on what is often referred to as strong process theory within organization studies. The attribute indicates a commitment to a process ontology rather than just a conceptualisation of certain objects of study as processes (Chia & Langley, 2004). “Weak” process theory takes processes to be important but ultimately reducible to the intervention of “things”, for example institutional maintenance as a process produced by the intervention of actors (“things”). “Strong” process theory, in contrast, presupposes that everything is ultimately, and ontologically, reducible to processes. Actors are therefore an effect rather than a cause of processes. The theory draws on the works of process philosophers, most notably Bergson and Whitehead, but also other philosophers, such as Dewey and Mead, Heidegger, Wittgenstein or Deleuze. (For a more comprehensive list see Helin, Hernes, Hjorth, & Holt, 2014.) Strong process conceptions of organising and organisations have been developed by, most prominently, Chia and colleagues (Chia, 1999; Chia & Holt, 2006; Chia &

King, 1998; MacKay & Chia, 2013; Nayak & Chia, 2011; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) as well as Hernes and colleagues (Bakken & Hernes, 2006; Hernes, 2008, 2014; Hernes & Weik, 2007).

Conceptualising institutions within a strong process theory means that it is endurance, not change, that needs to be explained. If one *assumes* that the world is changing at every moment, then this basic assumption cannot be explained. The challenge, instead, is to explain how endurance can emerge from this constant change⁴. This makes the theory well suited to analyse the article's central question. The idea of ontological processes implies that the world is continuously changing without a fixed entity that moves it. More importantly, most of the time processes change without a human actor changing them. While a machine, for example a car, will only move if somebody drives it, ontological processes do not require someone to drive them. There is continuous change exactly *because* the processes of the world unfold on their own and at every moment. This does, of course, not mean that humans never intervene. They do so, but a) not in all processes, and b) not always as the cause of the process (as they would in the case of the car). The classical rational model of action assumes that there is an established person that initiates (causes) an action. Strong process theory, in contrast, assumes that there is action establishing, among other things, an actor. Likewise, an institution is constantly established anew by a confluence of certain social processes. I will discuss this confluence under the heading "Dynamic form".

Strong process theory would answer the question of how this constantly (re-)established institution endures by pointing to certain recurring elements or patterns in its reconstitution (Weik, 2011, 2015). Rhythm and harmony will be my way of analysing these recurring elements or patterns. While the existing literature focuses on *what* these elements are (e.g. values, rules, resources), I focus on how they are *arranged* because I claim that the fact that

⁴ Other research paradigms would talk of explanans and explanandum or independent and dependent variables.

they recur (as well as the manner of their recurrence) and the fact that they are patterned (as well as the manner in which they are patterned) is just as important as the fact that they are values, rules etc. This arrangement is part of the dynamic form providing the process with an “identity”, it “holds it together”.

Dynamic form

Processes consist of different elements that are related to each other. Through this relation, they build internal complexity. The dynamic form is a part of the internal complexity. Dynamic forms of institutions are, in fact, prime examples of internal complexity. What constitutes a marriage is not just a simple matter of legal definitions and demographic criteria but a convolute of subtle *and related* distinctions and valuations regarding mutual love, faithfulness, sexual engagement, authority, responsibilities, resource distribution and many other factors. Different types of marriage are characterised by different configurations of these factors.

In process theoretical terms, the dynamic form provides the enduring component that allows us to (re-)identify the process as the same process. It also provides the “motor” that any self-perpetuating process needs. At the same time it prevents us from treating a process, in our case the institution, like a thing.

How does it achieve that? Let us start with the term “form”. Everyday language tends to think of forms as fixed shapes or boundaries of an object. This is, however, not the meaning that “form” has acquired in occidental philosophy. The philosophical notion of form is, in fact, directly linked to the problem of endurance. Why do humans always give birth to humans and crocodiles always to crocodiles? One of the earliest solutions to this is Plato’s notion of forms (or ideas). The form ensuring the reproduction of the species, he holds, inheres in the individual

organism and determines its development. It does not do so by providing a fixed shape, like a mould, but by acting as an active, generative mechanism that controls the organism's development within certain boundaries. It is, in this particular aspect, not dissimilar to a gene if we accept that a gene, too, is a concept⁵ (Holdrege, 2005). The elegance of the explanation lies in the form's capacity to generate an individual as an identifiable member of the same species but also vary it in response to other relevant factors, for example the environment. As a consequence, human beings can be small or tall, dark or fair, but still share a common humanity.

A similar theoretical figure is used in the social sciences when Bhaskar (1975) talks about generative mechanisms of nature that produce social reality or Bourdieu (1990) explains the habitus as a structuring structure. The important commonality in all these explanations is the active capacity of the mechanism to generate phenomena. These phenomena are not identical over time (i.e. do not have a fixed shape) but are similar enough to recognise them as belonging to "the same" species. The word "form" has the advantage over other terms that it explicitly expresses the second important characteristic, which is order. All these principles – form, idea, mechanism, structure – are ordering principles that order an inchoate mass of matter into recognisable objects. In other words, their generative power is directed towards the creation of order, not of matter. With regard to institutions, such a form inheres in the institution and (re-)generates institutional orders. I will call it the "institutional substance", a notion proposed and discussed by Friedland (Friedland, 2009a, b, 2013a, b) that thematises the active, non-rational component of institutions⁶. We will come back to the term in a moment.

⁵ The definition of a gene has varied over the decades to include functions, regions or codes of chromosomes. In any of these cases, however, a gene is a non-material entity, as opposed to a materially identifiable chromosome.

⁶ I should note for clarity, however, that Friedland does not view the institutional substance as a dynamic form in the processual manner I describe it. This is my development of the concept on top of, and beyond, what he suggests.

The term “dynamic” introduces a processual component. While forms in earlier times would often be identified as the “essence” of a thing, contemporary social science has not much time for essences (e.g., Spinoza & Dreyfus, 1996). Scholars often overlook, however, that the currently dominant processual view of institutions still requires some consideration of what permits us to see a process as one entity. If institutions are processes, what are they processes of? What is the commonality between activities, meanings, values, subjects and objects of a certain institution? What, in other words, is the enduring element? And how do we distinguish, say, the police process from the marriage process? An essence would come handy to answer these questions but we cannot use it without reifying the institution. The concept of the dynamic form allows us to achieve the same outcome within a processual framework. An interpreter of Aristotle (Sachs, 2001) seeking to translate Aristotle’s definition of the human soul has once described it concisely as “being-at-work-staying-the-same”, i.e. an active principle that continuously works to retain a person’s identity in the face of life’s many invitations to disperse, transform or forget.

This being-at-work can happen without permanent human intervention. This is best illustrated by homeostatic processes that come together in a manner that allows them to feed of, and perpetuate, each other creating a dynamic but stable system.

The dynamic form is, therefore, a process capable of generating daughter processes (in our case, practices or discourses or activities that we label “institutional”). The dynamic form of marriage, for example, generates marriage processes, such as church ceremonies, registry procedures, bridal dress making, or identifications as husband or wife. Its self-perpetuating function lies in *generating* marriage processes; its differentiating/identifying function lies in generating *marriage* processes. Together these functions explain an enduring self-identity.

Much like a homeostatic system⁷, it will continue until it is destroyed by an intervention or until small internal deviations accumulate to upset the balance.

The most prominent example for dynamic forms in the institutionalist literature is Friedland's concept of institutional substance. Friedland (2009a, b) argues that institutions are productive sites. They constitute specific institutional objects and subjects by investing them with valuation. This valuation is, in turn, derived from the cultural premises of the particular institution and thus content-specific for the particular institution. Institutions, hence, differ essentially from one another depending on their cultural premises. In order to invest objects and subjects, they need a value, a for-the-sake-of-which, and it is this for-the-sake-of-which that Friedland calls an institutional substance. An institution is hence an order of practices with means and ends culminating in a highest or ultimate value, the institutional substance. As such, the institutional substance is the thing which is enjoyed for its own sake (Friedland, 2009b:61).

This short description serves to identify institutional substances as dynamic forms. As productive sites they can be considered generative mechanisms. As producing essentially different institutions, they fulfil the differentiation/identification criterion. Since they produce institutional orders, they are ordering principles.

Now, if an institutional substance is a value, how is it dynamic? In a first step, it is probably helpful to speak of "valuation" rather than "value". A second step would, in line with the above, require us to think of the institutional substance as an arrangement of processes rather than a thing. I will illustrate this with the example of knowledge.

The institutional substance of the university may be identified as "knowledge" – bearing in mind that we are not talking about an object but a process, a dynamic arrangement of mental

⁷ The difference is that the dynamic form is not a static system reverting in a circular motion to its point of origin or equilibrium. It is a dynamic system. Luhmann as well as Maturana and Varela have hence suggested calling it "homeodynamic" (Kluge, 2015: 25). I prefer the term "dynamic form" instead.

and physical activities that, in Friedland's terms, invests subjects (e.g. professors, students) and objects (e.g. lecture theatres, books) with values and meaning. This dynamic arrangement is, from the emergence of the university in the 12th century, fraught with tensions that drive it to this very day (Weik, 2014), for example: Should universities charge for their teaching or is knowledge a good of such value that it should be distributed for free? To what extent should teaching be controlled by the state or church; to what extent should reason reign supreme? To what extent are universities obliged to legitimise the powers that be in exchange for privileges? Should universities provide vocational training or is knowledge as such valuable? Answers to these questions have, from the emergence of the university as an institution up to the present, been in constant flux with one pole waning while the other waxed, one pole resonating with, and the other conflicting with, new social and cultural structures. Nevertheless, they have always been *related* (my point about arrangements) and they have continuously generated new daughter processes, e.g. practices and subjects, of the university kind (my point about dynamic forms).

What has also persisted through all arrangements is the enjoyment of knowledge as the ultimate for-the-sake-of-which (my point about pleasure). It is probably fair to say that the masters of the 12th century as well as their successors in the 21st century value and enjoy knowledge. Some may be thrilled by the beauty of a theoretical construction, some by the thought of applying knowledge to help others, and some take joy from educating the next generation. Some have experienced the moment of grace when a solution that they have struggled with for months suddenly presents itself in all its breath-taking simplicity, and some the moment when a student they had given up on suddenly takes off.

To sum up, the endurance of institutional processes can be explained ontologically through the concept of institutional substances as dynamic forms. An institutional substance is an active ordering principle that creates a dynamic order of institutional practices, discourses, subjects

and objects. Each institution has its own specific substance that identifies it and differentiates it from others. The order of processes it creates is self-perpetuating unless destroyed through intervention.

Aesthetic feeling-perception of processes

Let us now turn to the second, epistemological, question regarding the feeling-perception of institutions. How do we perceive something that, like the dynamic form, is neither visible (audible, etc.) nor discursive? The classic answer, in a Kantian empirical tradition, is: We cannot. While we can observe, say, brides and wedding ceremonies and can interview spouses with regard to their feelings and attitudes, we cannot observe the institution of marriage. It is a mechanism that can only be inferred from this surface manifestations, much like gravity can be inferred from the fall of objects.

Strong process theory takes issue with this answer because it is, once again, based on a “substance thinking” in which an observer is one substance complete in itself, the object another substance complete in itself, and the link between both is something secondary, temporary, added on and tenuous. In contrast, strong process theory conceives subjects and objects to be constituted by the same processes, processes that relate entities to one another⁸. If relations, however, are primary and “things” are products of relations, then the particular relation of perception between subject and object becomes a very different one. Perception *constitutes* the perceiver as well as the perceived. A sound is a sound *because* it is perceived; I

⁸ A similar view, without the emphasis on process, is taken by relational sociologists (e.g., Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1996; Cooper, 2005; Emirbayer, 1997) where objects are bundles of relations.

am I *because* I perceive it (and if I did not I would be a different person). The perspective has been called “Naïve Realism” (Hoffmann, Trappe, Halbfass, Grünwald, & Abel, 1992) to indicate that it subscribes to a realist epistemology but without the “critical” (Kantian) division between subject and object.

It is along the lines of Naïve Realism that I claim we can feel-perceive institutions directly. To illustrate let me use the often-invoked simile of the river to describe the continuous, untriggered flow of – broadly speaking – “happenings” that life consists of. It has been said often that we make sense of this river by looking back on it. Doing this we perceive (i.e. isolate from the flow) waves, eddies and currents that we may then label with words. The word “construction” has been used for this activity to indicate its variable character; the variability being due to each person’s individual perspective. There is also some construction going on in the immediate vicinity of us as our body and its movements intervene in the flow and create formations that would otherwise not have been there. These are “normal” assumptions of the constructionist/constructivist persuasion. What I am, however, interested in are the perceptions we have from being immersed in that river. It is not what we see when looking back or directing our gaze here and there, but the feel of the water touching our skin, its gurgling while it rushes past us and the reflection of the light on it that ultimately determines how we see what we see when looking back. It is a very visceral but vague feeling. It is, almost by definition, a feeling we never attend to because our gaze is elsewhere. Nevertheless, I would claim that this feeling is just as essential to our understanding what a river is as our retrospective gaze on it.

This understanding of a river, moreover, not only adds to our knowledge about the world but shapes our actions in a fundamental manner that directly challenges cognitivist perspectives. To make that point, Nayak and Chia (2011:298) use Heidegger’s example of dwelling. He maintains that we do not build houses to then dwell in them, but that we dwell and therefore build houses. We live and experience first, and then create constructions (including institutions)

to fit these experiences. This provides a new interpretation of, and potential direction of development for, the concept of “inhabited institutions” (Binder, 2007; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). The thrust of the argument in this case is not that we need to study local manifestations because they offer different local interpretations but because they provide the co-presence and visceral proximity, even contiguity, necessary to interpret the subsequent abstractions (logics, rules) in the first place. Our understanding of marriage, for example, develops through a feeling-perception of marriage constituted by, among other things, attending weddings, growing up with married couples or dreaming about Mr/Mrs Right.

Because of this vague and visceral immediacy, the feeling-perception of institutions that I am looking for should not be confused with the study of feelings or emotions in institutions as conducted, among others, by Creed and colleagues or Voronov and colleagues (Creed et al., 2014; Voronov, 2014; Voronov & Vince, 2012; Voronov & Weber, 2016). I am not interested in questions surrounding the emotional reactions to certain institutional practices (i.e. feelings *in* institutions), for example the manner in which institutional practices cause us to feel shame or shame others. What I describe is the feeling *of* institutions, or more precisely, the (intuitive) feeling-perception of institutional processes that we are immersed in.

This is important because my argument goes beyond the idea that somebody likes an institution because he/she benefits from it emotionally. My point is not just that, for example, people who are happily married will feel-perceive the institution of marriage in a positive manner. What goes on between two individual spouses may contribute to a pleasurable feeling-perception, but the feeling-perception of harmony and rhythm that I will discuss in the next section can only arise from a multitude of occasions. It is the pleasure derived from being in sync with rhythms established by thousands of marriages, by enjoying a fit with societal values, childcare structures, taxation arrangements or societal discourses of success established far beyond the agency of the feeling-perceiving individual. This feeling-perception of supra-

individual patterns and rhythms is an important factor in the endurance of the institution beyond individual life-spans⁹.

It must be noted, however, that this feeling of being in synch with the outside world can be, in epistemological terms, just as fallible or even delusional as any cognitive judgment. We can, for example, fail to sense an evolving rupture or be confined to our own small in-group. Moreover, our feelings may be manipulated. As I have explained above, feelings also tend to be more fuzzy and ambiguous than cognitive judgments so that even the feeling of a “fit” may contain undertones of doubt and uneasiness.

Harmonic and rhythmic arrangements

If we can feel-perceive institutions directly, what do they feel like? What kinds of feeling-perceptions should we look for when studying them?

The term “arrangement” has been emphasised repeatedly in the previous sections. Two central aspects of arrangements are their harmonic and rhythmic qualities. I define, in line with common usage (Webster, 1986:1035), an arrangement that generates pleasure as a “harmonic arrangement” or just “harmony”. Rhythm is one form of harmony. It can occur with other forms of harmony, for example with melodic harmony (chords) in a piece of music, or it can come as the sole form of order, for example in the rhythm of a marching drum. Rhythm is created by periodicity. Periodicity is the repetition of a pattern within a certain duration. The pattern itself

⁹ Although the concept of feeling in the aesthetic perspective derives from a neurobiological understanding (Damasio, 2000, 2004), in this respect it aligns with Durkheim’s demand that the collective consciousness be regarded a “*synthesis sui generis*” (Durkheim, 1976: 424, emphasis in the original) of multiple individual consciousnesses. The *sui generis*, Durkheim continues, is a “world of sentiments, ideas and images” following their own laws of attraction, repulsion, union, division and multiplication. Note that these laws are also of an aesthetic nature to the extent that they describe dynamic arrangements.

is experienced as a succession of stresses and non-stresses following each other in a certain tempo.

It is important to note that both harmony and rhythm can act as intensifiers of an experience¹⁰. This intensification lifts experiences beyond a perception threshold (Damasio, 2000) so that we can perceive them as pleasurable rather than just “background noise”. We find examples for this intensification in everyday life in the rhythmic clapping of a crowd or the perfect moments in daily life when everything “goes just right” (see, for example, Taylor, 2012).

I find it quite remarkable that despite the many definitions emphasising the repetitive character of institutions, for example, as enduring regularities (Crawford & Ostrom, 1995) or broad patternings (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000), despite the accepted view of social logics being more mutable when they are rife with ambiguity and contradiction (and hence more stable in their absence) (Rao & Giorgi, 2006), despite even Jepperson’s (2002) choice of words regarding the *intensification* of individualism as the main theme of Western history, nobody seems to have made the link from repetition to rhythm or from patterns to harmony.

I think we feel-perceive the harmony of institutions when we feel how institutional subjects, objects, discourses and practices in our world come together in harmonic arrangements (as expressed by, for example, “fit”, “match”, “make sense”), and we feel-perceive the rhythms of institutions when we encounter institutional elements at expected intervals or experience that others engage with them in the same intervals or points in time. The importance of these rhythms, as rhythms of social life, has been stressed by a large number of authors (among many others, Adam, 1988; Albert, 2013; Hall, 1983; Lefebvre, 2004; Zerubavel, 1981), but again they have up to now not been linked to pleasure and institutional endurance.

¹⁰ Again, this is also true for their opposites, disharmony and the breaking of rhythms. The difference is that these tend to cause displeasure.

A case study of institutional maintenance in an elite university (Dacin, Munir, & Tracey, 2010) gives us an example of how harmony and rhythm come together in a ritual¹¹ that contributes to the endurance of the institution. From robes to oak-panelled rooms, the aesthetics of formal dining mark a special occasion. These aesthetics are, first and foremost, of an aesthetic nature as Dacin et al.'s quote of an earlier observation demonstrates:

“For two hours the silver dishes came, announced by the swish of the doors in the Screens as the waiters scurried to and fro, bowed down by the weight of the food and their sense of occasion. [. . .] The clatter of knives and forks, the clink of glasses, the rustle of napkins and the shuffling feet of the College servants dimmed the present. Outside the Hall the winter wind swept through the streets of Cambridge. Inside all was warmth and conviviality.” (Dacin et al., 2010:1398)

The arrangement of the tables in the hall (2010:Figure 1) shows a geometry of progress, a “way” leading from the bottom end to the dais bathed in light by the big window at the head. I hold that it is indeed this harmony and its effects that the authors talk about when they say: “... rituals induce a powerful desire in participants to maintain the *integrity* of the performance.” (2010:1413, my emphasis). Dacin et al. also discuss the importance of rhythm for the maintenance of institutions when they observe how the repeated enactment of the ritual “seduces college members into conforming to the norms and values of the ritual” (2010:1401). The term “seduce” is aptly chosen because this is not about convincing somebody cognitively but about circumventing their awareness to create the effect. The repetition of the ritual does not just involve the basic premise of pleasure, viz. “More of this will come your way if you behave” but creates a feeling of “This is how it always has been” and “This is how it *should* be” – the factual becomes moral. Adopting an aesthetic perspective therefore can explain the

¹¹ Though applied to a secular ritual in this case, the example fits well with Durkheim's observation that religious rituals are characterised by periodic recurrences. He explains: “... the rhythm which the religious life follows only expresses the rhythm of the social life, and results from it” (Durkheim, 1976: 349).

strange reassuring effect rhythms have on us. It is not just a matter of deriving safety from being able to cognitively predict what comes next but a felt-perceived gentle rocking motion, a lull that says “all is well”.

The important point the authors make is that the effects created outlast the evening and the dining hall location. They point to the fact that rituals are repeated performances (2010:1396 and 1401), and that it is their repetition that makes them performative. The performance in the dining hall is “rife with medieval ambience” (2010:1405) sending the message that the acts and actors of this particular performance are (small) parts in a very long tradition. The liminoid space the ritual creates (2010:1396) is liminoid in relation to other spaces that are absent – but *felt*, I would add - in this particular moment. Other performative features like altering the expectations of attendees, demarcating social class or providing cultural knowledge (2010:1401) all go beyond the particular manifestation. While relating to cognitive factors, there is also a clear aesthetic dimension to them, as captured by a student saying: “I mean, it [college dining] just gives you a very strong sense of belonging and that place being home” (2010:1403).

Conclusion

“In short, the trouble with the new institutionalism is that it does not have the guts of institutions in it.” (Stinchcombe, 1997:17)

I have claimed at the beginning that we are capable of feeling-perceiving institutions directly, and that this feeling-perception, if pleasurable, contributes to their endurance. I have now shown how we can understand institutions as processual arrangements of people, things,

actions and texts (being turned into institutional subjects, objects, practices and discourses) and how we can feel-perceive the harmony and rhythms of these arrangements.

In order for such institutional process arrangements to endure, they need to be configured in particular ways so as to regulate and perpetuate themselves without continued intervention by human actors. The ordering principle that underlies and generates such a complex internal order I have discussed under the heading of “dynamic form” or, in the case of institutions, as “institutional substance”. The institutional substance provides an active principle that generates and differentiates institutional “daughter” processes (i.e. arrangements of institutional subjects, objects, practices and discourses).

My main thrust in conceptualising institutional endurance in this way was to move away from the cognitive, rational and instrumental manner in which institutions have been discussed in organisational institutionalism in the last three decades. In particular I have sought to give conceptual weight to values, feelings and the human body. Feeling-perceptions, as conceptualised in the aisthetic perspective are first and foremost bodily perceptions that become known to us as rather vague and visceral feelings. Our response to them is primarily emotional and pre-cognitive. Institutional substances, on the other hand, are defined by ultimate values that are in each case specific to the institution. As values have, by definition, an affective component, the aisthetic perspective provides a connection between the three non-cognitive themes for the study of institutions.

As a result, the actors of the aisthetic perspective are well-rounded human beings with bodies and souls, not just rational decision-makers. They encounter institutions as part of their ongoing concern with the world and are immersed in them. To return to the image of the river, institutions are probably more like deep currents than ripples on the surface, to be felt rather than seen. This may also help to explain why they are not easily tinkered with through plans, designs and strategies.

My second concern was to re-establish the classic observation that institutions, though social constructions, are “external” to individual action. To do this, I have conceptualised institutional endurance as a process that does not require permanent human intervention. Institutions, as dynamic processual arrangements, have the capacity and internal complexity to reproduce themselves. Human agency may be *involved* in the processes but it is not the *cause* of endurance.

Going back to the explanations provided at the beginning of this article we can now see how the aesthetic perspective complements existing approaches of institutional endurance. With regard to the first account, I would claim that taken-for-grantedness is not essential for the endurance of an institution although it may facilitate it. If we, once again, take the example of marriage we will have to concede that it is far from being taken for granted in Western societies. Not only do a fair number of individuals agonise over the decision to get married or not, but there are also ongoing public debates, for example on the subject of same-sex marriage. While it is plausible that orders that remain latent meet with less resistance, the inverse conclusion does not hold. Making institutional arrangements explicit does not necessarily destroy the institution. There are two reasons for this. One, as I have explained, lies in the difference between action and causal intervention. In other words, actors may take action but this need not cause anything to happen on an institutional level. The second lies in the fact that institutional arrangements often contain internal tensions, as I have shown in the knowledge example. As valuations shift over time, some of these tensions can begin to threaten the integration of the whole and the arrangement must readjust in order to endure. This is how, for example, marriage in Western societies eventually abandoned the idea of the wife being the property of the husband. Such a readjustment process will inevitably bring with it discussions and political strife. The institution, however, endures *because* of it.

The second account of endurance proposes that institutions are essential for sensemaking and identity processes. I agree, although the aesthetic perspective shifts the weight in favour of our pre-cognitive capabilities. Institutional norms and roles are not just elements of sensemaking and identification. Rather, the feeling-perception of harmony and rhythm results in a feeling-perception of a “fit”. This fit is actually the basis or precondition for our reasoning that “A in the context of B makes sense” or that “Lifestyle X is me”.

The third account to do with freeing energy through simplification is the most difficult to integrate with the aesthetic perspective. This is partly because it refers to routines rather than institutions. Routines, though potentially part of an institutional arrangement, nevertheless lack the internal complexity to be self-perpetuating. For the same reason, I would not hold that institutions simplify anything although they may make future states more predictable because of their rhythms. To explore the distinction between simplicity and predictability, however, would go beyond the scope of this paper.

The fourth account, finally, is what I have discussed at length when introducing strong process theory and the dynamic form. While I would not negate that people sometimes speak up or act in defence of an institution (i.e. are involved in institutional processes), I am quite sceptical about the causal connection of such acts to institutional endurance. To make this case, one would need to provide a criterion that would explain why such acts are successful in some cases and not in others.

In conclusion, the aesthetic perspective presents a conceptualisation of institutional endurance that portrays institutions, once established, as dynamic processual arrangements capable of generation, self-perpetuation and differentiation. To the extent that they can fulfil these functions they do not require intervention by human actors. Human actors, vice versa, can feel-perceive the harmonies and rhythms of these arrangements and will not intervene to destroy them as long as they consider them pleasurable.

This article has laid the groundwork for an aesthetic perspective on institutions. More work, however, needs to be done to turn it into a full-fledged explanatory framework. The first task is to develop a vocabulary of the types of institutional harmonies and rhythms (similar to the artistic register) as well as differentiating notions of my very generic term “pleasure”. The second is to discuss values more with regard to their affective dimension and less in terms of Weberian value *rationality*. Finally, work on the social dimension of affect (among others, Jantzen, Fitchett, Østergaard, & Vetner, 2012; Reddy, 2001; Thompson & Willmott, 2016; Thrift, 2004) needs to be integrated to prevent the aesthetic perspective from becoming politically and sociologically naïve.

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