

## Introduction: institutions are us?

### **Combining personhood and technicality, permanence and change**

The main theme of this issue seems to be marked by an interesting semantic distinction: in the singular, the concept of *institution* is often taken as a synonym for a norm, convention or rule, thus pointing to something that pervades social theory and anthropological thinking in general. In the plural, however, *institution* is usually applied to bounded entities with legal status, bureaucratic organisations and hierarchical structures, thus pointing to a certain type of social formation easily associated with modernity and industrialisation (in this latter sense, it has also become fashionable to speak of ‘organisations’). The reasons for this distinction are not entirely clear, but they do seem to derive from certain cleavages ultimately relating to the founding oppositions between primitive/civilised, pre-modern/modern, rather than from consensual analytical effort. We would appear trapped by the historical ‘semantic slippage’ of the term (see Pina-Cabral in this issue). Our purpose of ‘rethinking institution’, in its broadest terms, is to interrogate this divide by discussing the two perspectives herein implicated and launching the basis for a more integrated view of institutions and institutionalisation processes.

In 1906, while analysing religious phenomena, Hubert and Mauss advanced a straightforward definition of institution as the ‘public rule of action and thought’ (Mauss 1968 [1906], I: 25). In fact, if we had to seek out the most synthetic formulation, it would be difficult to come up with a better alternative than this combination of four words: *public* (in the sense of shared by a collective) *rule* (in the sense of an organising principle) of *action* (in the sense of practice) and *thought* (in the sense of ways of perceiving and framing events). Of course, thoughts may also be conceived as a special kind of action (see Strauss 1993: 129–36) and thinking is indeed inseparable from the use of specific technologies of knowledge (cf. Miller and Rose 1990), but there does seem to be at least one good reason to keep the two words separate within this definition: the word ‘thought’ also appeals to a certain sense of intimacy and personhood as something deeply connected to our sense of self and personal identity and that is not indiscriminately transmitted to others. Thus, it is as if Hubert and Mauss were

saying institutions also formed a part of us. How great a part? – We think that this is a genuine ethnographic problem to which we suggest a general answer later on in this essay. For the moment, it is more important to realise that this Maussian conception of institution may be applied to anything contributing to the creation, reproduction or improvement of order within any practical context, either in the conventional field of organisation studies (encompassing not only firms and corporations, but also calendars, software programs or balance sheets) or beyond (ethnic and gender identities, family ties, lifestyles).

Such a broad conception of institution has the dual advantage of bringing technologies and materialities into the study of identities and social relations as well as bringing human affairs into technical contexts where they seem otherwise constantly downplayed – thus rebalancing analyses permeated either by human/non-human or by meaning/action divides. In fact, that would be one concrete purpose of our rethinking project: to look at institutions as ingenious combinations of personalities and materialities, where identity and family issues appear side by side with expertise and technocracy instead of treating the two realms separately. A second purpose has to do with issues of power and the dynamics of permanence and change. We argue that institutions are neither the stable coordinates of social life that the structural–functionalist paradigm made of them, nor inherently unstable formations capable of reflecting any type of social change, as post-structuralist and constructionist perspectives would have it. Rather, institutions possess a sort of *unstable stability* that stems from certain power arrangements but can nevertheless endure for a considerable amount of time. This means that, from an anthropological perspective, it may be more fruitful to consider both permanence *and* change as concrete outputs of particular institutional configurations (some of them specifically devoted to ‘maintenance’ or ‘conservation’ tasks, as well as to the creation, sanctioning and transmission of ‘news’, ‘novelties’, ‘innovations’), instead of viewing each of them as aprioristic principles that animate social ontologies. Both purposes are developed below. However, in order to better situate the contributions of the present issue, let us first take a look at how ‘institution’ and ‘organisation’ have been conceptualised since Hubert and Mauss.

## **The anthropology of organisations: a brief overview**

In this section, we shall concentrate on reviewing some of the literature around institutions (in the plural) and *organisations*, bearing in mind that – ethnocentric biases notwithstanding – hierarchical and bureaucratic institutions constitute the main empirical context of the contributions included herein. The final article in this collection, written by João de Pina-Cabral, will complement our perspective by revisiting the ‘tale of sociogenesis’ and considering the fate of the concept of institution (in the singular) within anthropology and sociology – from Frazer to Berger to Luckman.

To cut a long story short, we may state that the link between institutions and modernity–bureaucracy–formality has been taken for granted and has not been interrogated sufficiently. Within this framework, some tensions have emerged, such as those between the Durkheimian and Weberian approaches. Mary Douglas, one of the most renowned Durkheimian anthropologists, claimed that institutions ‘think’ (1987), in the sense that they foster knowledge processes or ‘thought worlds’ that

classify social realities and shape individual cognition. She goes further to state that institutions generate systems that classify both types of people and the relationships between them (frequently by analogy with the natural and the supernatural world). As such, institutional stability relies upon the naturalisation of social classifications within which the institution is perceived as founded on rightness, in reason and in nature (see Wright 1994a). Thus, for Douglas, 'institution' is a much broader concept than 'organisation' (Perring 1994). However, Douglas cannot escape the teleological and rule-bound behaviour emphasis that sees institutions as the outcome of a foundational act of will (see Pina-Cabral in this issue).

Some years ago, Lianos and Douglas (2000) wrote one of the most illustrative and mature texts that preserves the Durkheimian influence in understanding 'institutional environments' and the culture of dangerisation in security milieu. They studied automated socio-technical environments (ASTE) as structures that operate a social regulation where the user cannot negotiate with the system. Announcing the end of deviance, the authors believe these devices radically inform culture (understood as the socially conditioned cognition) by introducing in contemporary societies non-negotiable contexts of interaction. ASTEs are the extreme illustration of the Durkheimian and Douglasian theoretical devices. In other essays Lianos has expanded this theoretical framework based on new empirical examples like the magnetic tagging of products (Lianos 2003). While reconceptualising social control in post-industrial society – where it arises in ways often not intended to produce a controlling effect (Lianos 2001a, 2001b, 2003) – the author is specifically looking for the link in the intellectual chain from Durkheim to Foucault and beyond. Institution is defined as any source of mediating activity between human beings: 'In this sense, all private and public organisations and establishments are institutions because they regulate aspects of human behaviour as third parties, i.e. without being subject to cultural negotiation' (Lianos 2003: 413). Supermarkets, banks, ministries or Web portals are understood as sources of institutional sociality and normativity, planned as human managerial control and generative of a new stage in the development of social regulation because of their combined effects on users. The point is this: control is often perceived as beneficial and sometimes even liberating as much as it is constraining; it may represent a centrifugal force as much as a fragmentary one; it is often impersonal in its origin and atomised in its reception. One cannot help but be struck by the ways in which studies of contemporary organisational systems suggest innovative views of institutional control complexities. What is critical here, however, is not the argument *per se* but rather the view of institution *mainly* as normative socio-technical actions, which leads Lianos (2003: 420) to treat family and other domestic 'institutional' features simply as 'direct sociality'.

Taking a different direction, following in the steps of Max Weber (and Talcott Parsons), Clifford Geertz (1973) looks into multiplicity in any organisational setting. Whilst he may be considered an unexpected reference in an issue devoted to institutional thinking, Geertz's processual view of culture as webs of significance has come to deeply influence the anthropology of organisations (see Wright 1994b) by calling attention to fluidity where once there stood naturalised, mechanic and fixed metaphors of organisational life (such as the organisation as organism, the organisation as machine, the organisation as shared values and a list of attributes, i.e. 'culture' in a more objectified sense). However, even the contemporary study of organisations in anthropology seems to be ultimately constrained in a Weberian–Durkheimian debate. One of the few

exceptions is Michael Herzfeld (1992, 1997), who has explored the relationship between national identity and more localised models of social and cultural being through the understanding of mundane bureaucratic practices and representations. Herzfeld avoids explaining bureaucracy as the result of 'national' personalities or cultures (cf. Weber 1976), and searches instead for the symbols of an ideology and practice of accountability deployed both by clients and bureaucrats in a sort of common ground.

Outside anthropology, Chicago School interactionists such as Goffman (1961), Anselm Strauss (see Strauss *et al.* 1963, 1964) or Howard S. Becker (Becker *et al.* 1968), have acquired a reputation as true classics in the analysis of the formation and functioning of institutions. All three were ethnographers, paying great attention to the gathering of empirical data and to the way it could influence theoretical elaboration. However, they largely accepted the idea of institutions as bounded organisations in the formal sense, to which they added a keen perception of cultural specificity stemming from regular practice and professional routines. Goffman's emblematic idea of 'total institutions' as self-enclosed worlds – advanced in a 1957 essay further included in *Asylums* (Goffman 1961) – may be taken as the most extreme manifestation of this position, though his sociological argument also deserves being read as one example of a political stance precisely against that type of social incarceration practice (cf. Becker 2003).

The vision of institutions as (to a greater or lesser extent) bounded organisations, with legal status, compulsory rules and even a distinct 'culture', was in the ascendancy at least until the 1970s. In fact, hospitals, courts, schools, firms, supermarkets, police departments and banks continue to be privileged research sites, sometimes also appearing as privileged research objects, as in the case of much contemporary applied organisational ethnography (see Cunliffe 2010; Van Maanen 2001). Fiona Moore (this issue) argues that ethnography not only provides texture and generates concepts but also tests hypotheses and explanations for International Business studies that can potentially lead to an ambivalence-embracing perspective on this field. On other occasions, bounded organisations function as the necessary methodological circumscriptions for the study of work, careers, professions, meetings or organisational narratives (see Van Maanen 1977; Schwartzman 1989, 1993; Wright 1994a; Herzfeld 1992, 1997; Czarniawska 1997; Gellner and Hirsh 2001; Thedval 2006; Ardener and Moore 2007; Durão 2008).

A special mention has to be made to the work of Michel Foucault, particularly *Surveiller et Punir* (1975), which indeed puts forward a genuine transversal approach to the field of institutions in which family, school, barracks, factory, hospital and prison appear articulated to each other through the multiple agencies of what he calls 'disciplinary power' – an abstract type of social organisation that traverses and characterises the historical period known as 'modernity'. It could be argued that Foucault still reproduces the view that regards each institutional formation as a distinct 'world' or, in his terms, a particular actualisation of that abstract diagram of power relations. However, from this archaeological perspective on knowledge, the purposes of inter-institutional comparison acquire a different and more poignant scope – compare the way Foucault presents the navy military hospital as a sort of institutional composite that points to many directions at the same time (1975: 145–6). He also considers that the relations established between the practical field of institutional formations and the normative field of discourses and rules are marked not by conformity or correspondence but rather by discontinuities – which clearly separates his approach from more conventional sociological analyses. In fact, the work of Foucault persists as

the dominant voice in the contemporary field of governmentality studies (Foucault 2007; Miller and Rose 1990; Rose 1996), in which the shortcomings of an abstract conception of power are supplanted by a careful discussion of the 'state' and the ramifications of governing. This field of studies also has its important anthropological and ethnographic counterparts (Haggerty 2001; Inda 2005; Ong and Collier 2005). Marilyn Strathern (2000a, 2000b), in particular, has come to study the emergence of new financial moral accountabilities that govern the self and generate self-auditing persons in the academy (see also Pels 2000; Shore and Wright 1999; Garsten and Jacobsson, this issue).

Apart from Foucault and governmentality studies, New Institutionalism (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983), Actor-Network Theory (Latour 1986, 1999, 2005; Law 1994) and Complexity Theories (Thrift 1999; Urry 2005) also shifted our perspectives towards a series of transversal processes cutting across the life and work of institutions as legal and bounded entities. New institutionalism, with its emphasis on isomorphism, considers several types of 'institutionalised rules' (programs, techniques, services and products) that pervade different institutional settings, for example formal contracting, consultancy or accounting procedures (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983). These rules do more than just provide a legal framework that every organisation has to adapt to: they are crucial for defining just what an organisation is, its boundaries and how they are established (for an example detailing the importance of accounting to organisational delimitation, see Hines 1988: 258 footnote 2). Of course, many of these definitions, as well as the sets of rules underlying them, may be openly contested, which makes institutions – whether in the sense of formal organisations or institutionalised rules – a type of social reality vulnerable to a greater or lesser extent to different kinds of change.

Inspired by Gabriel Tarde and the American pragmatists, as well as by Garfinkel, Alfred North Whitehead, Deleuze and Greimas, the so-called Actor-Network Theory approach is focused on the formation of *worknets* (Latour 2005) or *action-nets* (cf. Czarniawska 2004) as constellations of interlinked actions and events that usually transcend this or that particular organisation, this or that community of practice. Such an articulating process is not linear: it entails a series of calculations, adaptations and negotiations (usually subsumed under the term 'translation'). Hence the idea that few things travel from one practical context to another without being subject to some sort of modification (Latour 1999: 15). The work carried out across action-nets may on occasion give rise to stabilised entities and systems, capable of imposing their view (their particular translation) on all other components within the network, thus approximating the institutionalised rules and processes of new institutionalism; on other occasions, the results are more volatile and transient. In accordance with the theories of *organising* that have come to prompt *how* questions rather than *if* or *to be* questions, one can see the benefits of looking for *performative* rather than ostensive definitions of organisations, as well as of using the adjective 'collective' rather than 'social' (Latour 1986, 2005; Czarniawska 2008). Whilst we have recently observed great efforts to document institutions as unstable processes in anthropology and sociology, there still remains much to be said about why some 'organised elements' persist more than others.

Finally, with regard to complexity theories, these also seem more inclined to the analysis of globalised networks and systemic configurations endowed with a capacity of self-reproduction across time and space (Urry 2005). The idea of path dependence is often invoked to acknowledge the fact that small, highly contingent causes may indeed

generate big, imposing effects – a historical view applied by the economist Paul David to the proliferation of economic standards (see David and Greenstein 1990). On the other hand, acknowledging the presence of uncertainty and critical tensions both within and across organisations, Laurent Thévenot (2001, 2006) invites us to study the different modes of coordination that contribute to the (relative) stability of organisational worlds.

We consider that these recent approaches – from Foucault and governmentality studies to complexity theories – have successfully demonstrated the limitations to any conception of organisations/institutions as clearly bounded realities. This is not the same as saying that boundaries are not an issue when speaking of organisations/institutions – they certainly are, and that's why it is sometimes so hard to define these boundaries, assuming they are clear-cut. In truth, the Maussian concept of institution (in the singular) also avoided definite circumscriptions long before they became crystallised in the field of organisation studies. Furthermore, the Maussian formulation may also be helpful when it comes to grasping certain limitations of Governmentality Studies, New Institutionalism, Actor-Network Theory and Complexity Theory – in particular with regard to their vestiges of modernism. These vestiges have to do with a bias towards technocratic and knowledge-production contexts which – notwithstanding all emphasis on articulation and translation – frequently draws on very trivial visions of institution/organisation that in the end remain almost untouched, serving as the empirical basis over which an appealing and elaborate terminology is juxtaposed. Thus, while describing 'marketization agencies' as the range of actors that compete for the definition and valuation of goods inside a specific market configuration, Çalişkan and Callon (2010: 8) add that these agencies are usually composed of 'firms, trade unions, state services, banks, hedge funds, pension funds, individual consumers and consumer unions and NGOs' – a useful but rather (a) conventional list, after all, in which we find too many Weberian-like 'compulsory organizations' (1968 [1956]).

The focus on technocracy is sometimes reinforced by a careful avoidance of 'human' matters and sociological filiations related to family, ethnicity, gender or self-identity. This is certainly not true of all authors working within each of the approaches outlined above. But many treat these filiations superficially, or as decorative features within complex arrangements to a greater or lesser extent. It is our impression, quite to the contrary, that family, ethnicity, gender and self-identity filiations also involve specific institutionalising processes cutting across and articulating with the contexts of specialised labour. The article by Susana Durão (this issue) illustrates how family and homeland ties influence the way police shifts are organised, creating a sort of informal order juxtaposed over the official/formal shift schedule that clearly impacts on police management in Lisbon (where most cops effectively experience a sense of dislocation). In order to maintain some organisational uniformity, the police institution must ensure a high level of individual mobility, this flexibility being part of its persistence over time. In the same vein, Xiang Biao (2007) has shown how ethnicity is important when it comes to the institutionalisation (or marketisation, to use the term of Çalişkan and Callon) of an informal, highly flexible workforce in the information technology field, sustained at a regional level by the dowry institution and yet capable of serving large international corporations at a global level. French anthropologist Florence Weber (2001) describes the ways in which workers at Montbard see production as something that is not confined to the factory but, rather, is locatable in everyday life, right *next to it*. The issue of ethnic identity is also relevant in the work of other anthropologists (see Ardener and Moore 2007).

We may thus begin to see how the Maussian notion of institution ('public rules of action and thought') may assist studying what are usually considered modern, 'complex' and highly technological environments by casting away what is left of technocentric and bureaucratic proclivities, and bringing back a genuine holistic perspective into the study of contemporary configurations of order.

## Institutions and the 'environment'

Institutions are multiple and ubiquitous even though this does not mean that everything may be taken to be an institution or – more precisely – that every anthropological object is an institution. However, if we conceive institutions as collective principles for organising action and thought, according to our Maussian view, then what exactly is non-institutional? The most immediate answer would highlight emotions, experiences, skills and personhood as more idiosyncratic affairs that are nevertheless part of social and professional life and, as such, traversed by institutions as well – though not totally reducible to institutional terms. Friends, lovers, colleagues, strangers and passersby are not properly institutions – see Lochlann Jain's (2007: 61) recent discussion of the bystander as 'integral and random parts' of automobility public environments – and the same may be said of things like memorabilia, decorative objects or personal collections, even if produced by institutions and following determinate standards of form. Similarly, all private classification systems, like those organising the 'My documents' folder in desktops and laptops (see Bowker and Star 1999: 9–10) are not institutions, whereas the Windows and Microsoft Office programs supporting these documents should be considered as such. Along with institutions, all these non-institutions are part of a reality that we might call the 'environment', in the sense of the milieu that we inhabit and actively engage with, in a process of continuous mutual adaptation and co-evolution (cf. Ingold 1996, 2000). Therefore, the study of institutionalising practices invites us to better define and understand the environment as an existential framework, because a part of the environment is made of institutions. Likewise, a proper focus on environmental issues will prompt a deeper understanding of instituting practices by exploring how concrete persons – with bodies, wishes, passions and ways of reasoning – surrounded by 'things' get to organise themselves through their daily practices.

Pierre Bourdieu (1972) proposed something of this kind with his theory of power and practice, especially with the notion of *habitus* as a system of durable bodily dispositions, which effectively mediates between self and the world while at the same time acting against the use of simplistic distinctions like those between society/individual, objectivity/subjectivity or exteriority/interiority. Nevertheless, it is possible to argue that Bourdieu's *habitus* appears mostly as a 'research posture' (see Wacquant 2004: 39), rather than a theoretical program. *Habitus* is still a structuralist concept and, moreover, one deeply rooted in a social reproductivist and past-centred view that does not contemplate properly the possibility of transformation. We must agree with Eric Wolf (2001: 391) when he states that in anthropology 'there was little concern with tactical power in shaping organisations, maintaining them, destabilizing them, or undoing them'. However, by presupposing attention to reality perceptions, grounded theories and ethnomethodologies (Garfinkel 1967), the theories of the

environment enveloping instituting acts may enable ethnographers to perceive how society is literally held together – and also partially torn apart.

In this issue, the articles by Steve Hoffman and Daniel Seabra Lopes represent important contributions for researching such matters. The first tells us about the vocabularies within which university–industry relations are being (re)conceptualised and discussed at a ground level by those directly involved in knowledge production (professors and researchers). The second deals with financial numbers and reporting within retail banking in an attempt to characterise the environment sustaining economic calculations in a professional context and to reflect on the prevailing power of numerical inscriptions: the main idea is that the objective and neutral character usually attributed to financial results is not especially functional at a micro/environmental level, since the production of such numbers is also deeply related to subjective aspects.

This topic of the environment also brings forth, once more, the intricate and mutual relationships established between institutions and multiple forms of identity – personal, familial, gendered, ethnic or national. Being all around us, institutions contribute to structuring what we are and may indeed be taken as a part of us. What we are calling the environment, on the other hand, is an aggregate of institutions, institutional configurations, objects, desires and expectations. It is not necessarily a wider or more articulated level of organisation. In fact, certain environments may be spaces of confusion, where people strive to resist dominant modes of organisation (cf. Biehl and Locke 2010). As closer to issues of personhood, however, the more probable is it that environments are also warmer and more emotional. And the fact that they are connected to human ontologies has a particular impact on the institutional dimension of environments. In truth, many movements of de-instituting and re-instituting are motivated by the circumstances where particular groups of people no longer ‘see themselves’ or ‘believe’ in some of their institutions. In such cases, institutions can continue to exist, though without strong identification ties they tend to become strange and indifferent to the persons they serve (Herzfeld 1992; Strathern 2000b), or indeed openly hostile (Biehl and Locke 2010). Institutions may yet persist in such scenarios, based on coercion or repetition; or they can crumble like a house of cards and vanish rapidly, leaving almost no trace of their presence in the world. Without a proper focus on the environment, our understanding of such institutional perseverance or demise issues would remain incomplete. In fact, we contend that an environment-based ethnographic perspective represents a significant advantage point in the study of contemporary power/state relationships, one that may lead to a reframing of the dynamics of permanence and change.

## **Power, change and the institution**

The relationship between institutions, power and change constitutes one important subject of institutional analysis that deserves separate consideration. According to Eric Wolf (2001), organisations set up relationships between people through the allocation and control of resources and rewards, forming one key feature in the study of power relations. In fact, it would be appropriate to say that institutions – any type of institution, from firms to open plan interior design to maps to marriage – always articulate some kind of power, be it formally delegated across a hierarchy or dispersed horizontally through

government procedures or market encounters, or embodied in routinised practices. As such, it is important to acknowledge that institutions do not flow freely across the world, nor are they always emerging or being transformed. They must endure for a certain amount of time and project an image of stability. Indeed, all institutions have a history, a background of past occurrences deriving a set of defined expectancies. In Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (1991 [1955]) one may find a revealing description of the recently formed Cao Dai religious/military sect, which is presented as a 'Walt Disney fantasia of the East', a seemingly ridiculous and unconvincing synthesis of Christianity, Buddhism and Confucianism. However, while leaving the newly built cathedral, the narrator wonders if his overall impression of artificiality would be different had that same building existed for five centuries instead of merely two decades, with the corresponding marks of the passage of time being visible to all visitors.<sup>1</sup> The question remains today: Is it possible to assert that sometimes the longer the history of an institution, the more the latter becomes incorporated into the ordinary actions of participants and thus taken for granted and removed from open political discussion?

Physical indexes of antiquity can indeed be persuasive, as Greene suggested, and they may serve the interests of different political groups – one striking example being the use of museumised regalia and monuments by both colonial and post-colonial powers in South Eastern Asia (Anderson 1991: 178–84). Notwithstanding this, institutional stability is permeable to negotiation and change. Or, as Balandier (1970) put it, the work of power is never done – it operates against entropy. The extent to which a particular institutional configuration may become almighty and irreversible (and thus non-negotiable) has been equated in literary (Orwell 2008 [1949]), philosophical (Rorty 1989, chapter 8) and sociological terms (Barry and Slater 2002: 190 footnote 7), though it still remains to be demonstrated empirically.

Anderson (1991: 163–85) analyses in some detail three types of enduring and interrelated political institutions implemented by 19th-century colonial states: the census, the map and the museum. He shows that institutions may exist within a framework that encompasses other institutions that can appear larger and more powerful, at least for a certain time, or smaller and powerless to the point of not at all resembling institutions. We may apply the notion of 'institutional configuration' to these articulations between (scaled) institutions, leaving the notion of 'environment' to the interrelationships between institutions or institutional configurations *and* non-institutional elements. All mentioned aspects – enduring capability, permeability to negotiation and inter-institutional articulation – are relevant when it comes to inspecting the relationship between institutions, power and change.

Inter-institutional articulation across different scales deserves accurate attention. Though it is common to read about micro/macro constituencies and tensions in anthropology, these days we hardly ever hear about the *mezzo* – even if the presence of multiple organisational dimensions and schemes may be perceived in our texts. We suspect that a certain resistance to taking intermediate scales more seriously may find its roots both in theoretical reasons – e.g. the negation of the functionalist age of Merton's middle-range theories (see Merton 1957) – and in methodological reasons – especially the current use of face-to-face observer participant and interview techniques at a micro level. However, as suggested by Wolf (2001: 391), organisational activity 'draws on

<sup>1</sup> We thank Mark Maguire for this suggestive literary insight, as well as for other interesting references that have enriched this essay.

tactical power to monopolize or parcel out liens and claims, to channel action to certain pathways while interdicting the flow of action into others’.

Though common sense associates political power with legitimate authority and legal control over the state, any divide between formal and informal institutions apropos such matters proves inappropriate. As stated above, one cannot postulate the existence of any formal/informal divide, even within usually called modern, highly technocratic institutions – just as one cannot assume the political dimension of institutions to be *always* formalised. Formalisation through bureaucratic procedures and technocratic competences is but one possible means of legitimising or imposing something, whereas political struggles relate, precisely, to issues of institutionalisation and de-institutionalisation that bring forth many other, non-bureaucratic, forms of achieving legitimacy. One of the most effective forms of power fixation is through ritualisation, often as a crystallisation of imperative social power (Bloch 1974, 1977; Bourdieu 1994: 107). Other examples of non-bureaucratic legitimisation or imposition include open verbal discussion, violent contestation or even armed conflict. In sum, Weber’s compulsory organisations, though they may appear strong and inviolable, are by no means all-encompassing and pervading. In fact, they often have a shorter existence and experience a more abrupt ending than institutions deemed more informal and ‘traditional’ (cf. Czarniawska 2004: 787).

This is corroborated by modern analyses of ‘the state’. In fact, there is a growing tendency to analyse the state as a set of organising activities in transformation – or a ‘process’ (Gailey 1987) – the very conception of ‘state’ as a set of reified and disembodied structures representing an effect of state practices themselves (Mitchell 1991). A new emphasis on state-making processes takes account of the ‘diversity and fluidity of form, function and malfunction’ and of ‘the extent to which all states are internally divided and subject to penetration by conflicting and usually contradictory forces’ (Bright and Harding 1984: 4). In an emblematic article, James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta (2005 [2002]) convincingly demonstrate the importance of multiple bureaucratic routines for the achievement of the spatial orders and hierarchies of scale that actually form the state. That is why states may be better viewed not as in opposition to something called ‘society’ but as themselves composed of bundles of social practices that are every bit as ‘local’ in their social situatedness and materiality as any other (Ferguson 2006: 99; Gupta 1995; see also Scott 1998, for a classic account of centralised planning and its derailments). The problem of locality in relation to state authority is explicitly treated by Gonçalves Praça (this issue), though not exactly as a way of reproducing state power but rather of instituting – i.e. render visible and acceptable to central governors and traders, and thus officialise – what from the perspective of regional mollusc farmers appear to be abnormal clam mortality rates. Moreover, this contribution helps us reconsider the role of counting as a typical centralised procedure, as it is more and more appropriated by actors who clearly look at the state (and market) from ‘below’.

This means that the state still represents a point of reference in terms of social hierarchy, though it is not always ‘above’ all other institutions. Old topographies of power have been clearly confronted by James Ferguson in his study of social movements, NGOs, states, and other organisational forms in Africa. Taking the example of humanitarian organisations such as Oxfam, CARE or Doctors without Borders, which perform state-like functions in Africa, he states that ‘In all of these cases, we are dealing with political entities that may be better conceptualised not as “below” the state, but as integral parts of a new, transnational apparatus of governmentality’

(Ferguson 2007: 103). In the same vein, Garsten and Jacobsson (this issue) describe the emergence of what they call a post-political order epitomised by the United Nations Global Compact Initiative for the promotion of Corporate Social Responsibility, which appears to be a soft form of regulation more inspired by the free transnational market than by conventional state principles.

Whilst the emergence of an irreversible and absolute form of power remains, at best, a theoretical possibility – though one deserving to be taken seriously – many authors seem to embrace a diametrically opposite view that sees power and institutions as profoundly challengeable realities under permanent transformation. Aihwa Ong and Stephen Collier (2005) invite us to appreciate the subtle changes that occur at the ‘spaces of assemblage’ where the global forms of governance, technocracy, markets and ethics are combined with specific and very different orders of value. Taking this stance further to the side of Deleuze, Biehl and Locke (2010: 336) consider the ‘life bricolages’ that minor actors must develop in order to resist the constraints of techno-economic arrangements. There is undoubtedly enormous potential in these ideas. However, they seem too close to another theoretical stance that – like that of the absoluteness and irreversibility of concrete power forms – also remains ahead of any empirical demonstration. Though institutions are always, in principle, ‘changeable’, this doesn’t mean that they are ‘always undergoing change’. On the contrary, the conditions that may assist institutional change and actual power rebalancing must be carefully investigated.

The reputation of the three major ratings agencies was so deeply affected by the 2008 financial crash that their end was equated and other alternatives were advanced under what appeared to be an imperious need to reform the financial system. However, three years later, the same ratings agencies continue to operate, their valuations impacting on the situation of European countries like Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Spain and Italy almost as if nothing had happened, whilst ongoing financial reforms are timid and, in many cases, innocuous. Something very similar may happen with current political transformations in North African countries, illustrating that, even after significant political discussion and social upheaval, institutional change is not always around the corner. And that’s because some institutions have more power than initially thought – Anderson’s (1991) examples of census, map and museums’ prevalence being typical in this respect. In fact, the degree of power that an institution mobilises may not be easily comprehensible without the counter-proof of a considerable blow – which makes the study of these combinations between power and change an eminently empirical and relativistic task.

This influences the way change has been conceived by social theorists. Some authors – particularly those inspired by Tarde and Deleuze – present change as an ontological principle prior to any form of organisation, something that impacts on all levels of social coordination without being, in turn, affected by them. However, it seems clear that this conception of change is also a product of institutional practices associated with social science and philosophical endeavours, which appear similar, in many respects, to the practices of corporate marketing research toward the development of ‘new’ goods and services, or to those of laboratories toward the presentation of ‘discoveries’. In any of these cases, that which is identified, made and valued as ‘new’ are not absolute realities, but quite relative ones: they are the result of specific institutional conditions of production and they address more or less restricted audiences. The article by Emília Margarida Marques (this issue) illustrates this point clearly. She shows how

factory administrators support the adoption of 'new' fully automated procedures of glass production in accordance with hegemonic market values, whereas employees praise seemingly 'older' forms of human-mediated automation. In fact, what is 'new' for employers is viewed as more of the same capitalistic reductionist recipe by the workers, whose attention is clearly focused on the creative side of their skilled tasks (Ingoldian terminology being entirely appropriate here). Both sides have their own views of innovation and change: what distinguishes them is that they don't have exactly the same capacity for instituting their views – or the same power. Thus, from an anthropological and ethnographic perspective, we think it can be more fruitful to analyse change as one relativistic result of concrete institutional articulations rather than the manifestations of an ultimate or primordial order of being.

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To sum up, we can say that looking at institutions from Hubert and Mauss's perspective (as public rules of action and thought) may help us overcome the informal/formal, human/non-human, emotional/technical and other similar dichotomies that still mark a good part of contemporary research in organisational settings, by integrating both sides in the same analysis instead of privileging either one or the other. This may be done by a proper focus on the environment as the locus where personhood, emotions and skills are mixed together with institutions and institutional configurations, all mutually constituting each other. At the same time, an environmental perspective may lead to a reconfiguration of the relationship between institutions, power and change, notably by detaching the ethnographic endeavour from the reinstatement of a dialectics of permanence/change as core ontological principle and enabling instead a more fruitful recognition of permanence and change as (relativistic) institutional outcomes stemming from power relations. The following articles offer interesting case studies for the application of these ideas.

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*Susana Durão*  
*Institute of Social Sciences*  
*University of Lisbon*  
*Av. Professor Aníbal de Bettencourt, 9*  
*1600-189 Lisbon*  
*Portugal*  
*ssbdurao@gmail.com*

Daniel Seabra Lopes  
 Research Centre in Economic and Organizational Sociology (SOCIOUS),  
 School of Economics and Management, Technical University of Lisbon  
 Rua Miguel Lupi 20  
 1249-078 Lisbon  
 Portugal  
 dseabralopes@gmail.com

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