

# Institutions and Modernity

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Primary submission: 06.09.12 | Final acceptance: 01.11.12

## Abstract

**Purpose:** Modernity consists of many conflicting aspects: It brings many empty promises, yet has resulted in new institutions that create bridges between the values and interests of millions of people who seek freedom, prosperity, quality of life, strengthened democracy and social justice. In this paper I attempt to a gain and loss account against modernity, because institutional rules are not only conducive to cooperative interactions, but to hostile interactions as well. People are not always guided by moral commitment, but rather more often driven by cold calculation or coercion.

**Methodology:** Modernity has at least three definitions. The first definition is based on ideas that took over the imagination of the era. The second definition is based on an analysis of the behavior of people who respond to reason as well as emotion and believe that they act more rationally than their ancestors or the traditional “others”. The third definition is the one closest to my heart, consisting of the use of institutional categories. Institutions offer practical ways of connecting ideas and people. The challenge for them is the result of deepening local and national interdependencies, but increasingly often also regional (e.g. European) and global. Interdependencies are the result of the scientific and technological revolution, global markets, global governance mechanisms, the emergence of new social forces and cultural conflicts (against the background of reconciling identity and differences).

**Conclusions:** The most important task is to identify the mechanisms of complex systems so that people know how to act under conditions of uncertainty, risk and crisis. Hence, the expectations toward institutions often exceed their abilities. Even though new institutions are being created and old ones are being fixed, we are witnessing and participating in, institutional paralysis and the decay (e.g. corruption). In this situation, it is imperative not only to improve control methods (e.g. legal), but also to resort to normative systems (values and identity) and knowledge (competence and skills). The source of this paralysis is often man himself, convinced of his own maturity and equipped with all sorts of rights, but manipulated on a scale not yet seen in the past. We are experiencing our own struggle as to what roles are closest to us, e.g. consumer, investor, or citizen?

**Research Implications:** Modernity is an emblematic, but confusing term. Therefore, the most important task is to identify the activities of complex systems, so that people know how to act under conditions of uncertainty, risk and crisis. People – agencies must operate in structures that define the boundaries of their actions. The main task of social sciences is to identify the conditions for the construction of successful configurations of agencies and structures.

**Originality:** Sometimes the “old” is better than the “new”, but to adopt this as a principle of life would be a mistake. It is better to think that the “new” is a metamorphosis of the “old”, sometimes expected, sometimes not. Based on the example of capitalism – first commercial capitalism, then industrial capitalism, and today financial capitalism – I demonstrate how the mechanisms of institutional morphogenesis work, with emphasis on structured cooperation and organized conflict.

**Keywords:** modernity, institution, complex interdependence, bounded rationality, institutional morphogenesis, capitalism, agency and structure

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*Action is consolatory. It is the enemy of thought  
and the friend of flattering illusions*  
Joseph Conrad, *Nostramo* (1904, p. 107)

## | The Guiding Idea

Good institutional rules are conducive to the overall success of individuals and communities in economic, political, social and cultural life. At the same time, this success is often accompanied by a lack of concern for the common good – truth, justice, beauty, happiness or spiritual growth. Could this be a confirmation of the idea that only homo oeconomicus can be successful, as opposed to homo cooperans? That fact that such two-way thinking about human nature and the surrounding world does indeed exist is confirmed by the juxtaposition of facts and values observed in social sciences – the facts of life versus the values in life.

The conflicting aspects of modernity have been exposed since the second half of the 19th century. This has been captured brilliantly by the historian Henry Adams (who belonged to a family in which there were two U.S. presidents), who wrote the following:

*The Pilgrims of Plymouth, the Puritans of Boston, the Quakers of Pennsylvania, all avowed a moral purpose, and began by making institutions that consciously reflected a moral idea. No such character belonged to the colonization of 1800. From Lake Erie to Florida, in a long, unbroken line, pioneers were at work, cutting into the forests with the energy of so many beavers, and with no more express moral purpose than the beavers they drove away. The civilization they carried with them was rarely illuminated by an idea; they sought room for no new truth, and aimed neither at creating, like the Puritans, a government of saints, nor, like the Quakers, one of love and peace* (Adams, quoted in: Diggins 2010, p. 113)

This thesis sounds like a sad philosophical confession. However, reality is not quite as gloomy as suggested by the above statement. Although it is true that modernity has been accompanied by a lot of empty promises, the promises have taken the form of good institutions created in a world in which even the selfish homo oeconomicus built collaborative relationships. It should be mentioned that it is in human nature to engage in pro-social activities. I will elaborate a profit and loss account in a world of cold calculation and even coercion and in a world of moral commitment. Rarely are these worlds completely separated from one another. Institutions constitute the fields where simultaneously cooperative and hostile interactions take place. They are systems of stimuli and anti-stimuli. If the institutional rules are good, then the participants/players come to the conclusion that by working together in the spirit of cooperation they can maximize the pool of winnings. I will demonstrate how this is done, referring to social sciences, mainly sociology and management sciences.

Firstly, I will deal with the definition of modernity in terms of institutions; secondly, the metamorphosis of institutions under conditions of complex interdependences; thirdly, the failures

experienced by people and systems in contemporary institutional orders; and finally, I will present some practical recommendations.

## Modernity as an Institutional Practice of Integrating Ideas and People

I define modernity in terms of institutions. Previously, modernity was defined in two other ways. The first way consisted of a description of the ideas that took over the imagination of the era, such as freedom, democracy, equality, the nation, citizens and human rights. These ideas were like opening windows to the world, or stepping into the light. This alone was supposed to be enough to improve the surrounding reality. The grand gallery of those that opened windows includes Machiavelli, Luther, Erasmus of Rotterdam, Hobbes, Locke, Smith, Rousseau, Marx, de Tocqueville, Mill, Weber, Nietzsche and many others.

However, if you want to achieve something, you must not only use windows, but also doors. This can be done in two ways, the second and third approach to the definition of modernity. The second way comes down to an analysis of the behavior of people who individually and as if without any external assistance, confident of their ideals and skills of conduct, achieve what is important to them. Rational behavior is defined as modern, as opposed to traditional, irrational behavior. Rational refers to reason, to interests and to new values such as humanism. The image is sometimes diversified with an analysis of emotions, such as compassion. The human being is considered the active player and is placed on a pedestal.

The third way of defining modernity (another way of using a door) consists of using institutions as platforms enabling joint action among people. Institutions are built in order to control people's behavior in accord with ideas that are imposed by the elite, by the masses, or by the forces within – the citizens. In addition to general ideas or visions, institutions consist of rules in the form of legislation, and operational policies recommending how a person should behave depending on the position occupied in the division of labor. A company, for example, may be divided in the following way: owners, workforce, consumers, creditors (banks), suppliers, competitors, politicians, local authorities, etc.

Modernity is a continuous process of building new institutions, as well as destroying or repairing old institutions. The need for these activities had its roots in capitalism, Protestantism, the nation-state, putting human dignity in the spotlight (humanism). It recognizes the rule of law to be a formula for the legitimacy of the ruling power. There was a strong belief that it is easy to build institutions. This belief was either based on the account of the ideas that they were supposed to serve, as they were sublime, or of practical needs. Institutions were supposed to be the best instruments to achieve success. And they did help, especially in the economy, for in the 1820s the modern economic growth began. The situation in politics was rather unstable, but if liberal democracy can be considered a measure of success, then it emerged not so long ago. Despite this, and possibly under the influence of the fall of communism, there was an American political scientist at the beginning of the 1990s who believed the case to be positively foregone. Eventually, he changed his mind. Today, this same political

scientist aptly writes about the possibility of a political setback (Fukuyama, 2012, p. 534). There is less success in the sphere of eliminating socio-economic problems, because social inequalities are growing, people lack jobs, corruption is everywhere, etc. In the cultural sphere tensions increase between identity and diversity, which are exacerbated by globalization. Culture itself becomes an active factor of change, but how it works is still quite a mysterious process.

Without good institutions nothing can be done. This is a statement of the World Bank at the end of the millennium, a time when market deregulation was the latest trend. Institutional deficit is omnipresent in life and in rhetoric.

## | **Complex Interdependence and its Institutional Implications**

The need for institutions stems from deepening interdependence, which now applies to the entire globe. Institutions have managed to learn how to operate local as well as national systems, but they often appear to be helpless when it comes to broader interdependencies. The state apparatus lacks competence in this field. The state itself is subject to redefinition. The difficulties in this area are so severe that some social forces would even like to restrict external contacts, on the grounds of real and false threats.

Despite the lack of competence, over the past 30 years it has become a common belief that it is easy to associate the “particular”, i.e. local, national, with the “universal”, i.e. external: regional, global. Robertson described this as the universalization of the particular and the particularization of the universal (Robertson, 1992). We are all “glocal” now, and at the level of the individual this association is rarely a big problem (Bartkowski, 2012; Bokszański, 2012). It is much more difficult, however, to achieve similar cohesion on a larger scale. This is clearly visible in the European Union, possibly the most ambitious institutional project in history. According to some, this project serves the interests of the people involved in it, but it is still sometimes described as “European Mummy” (Mulewicz, 2012, p. A10). According to others, the more economic regulation there is, in terms of trade, the more “losers” there are, and the greater national identity and opposition to the coordination of the EU becomes (Fligstein, 2008, p. 218). There is no predetermined ratio between the internal and the external. EU member states may continuously want to change this ratio. Given the development of the institutional configuration called the national state has taken hundreds of years, why should new relationships between states (supranational) be established any quicker?

Complex interdependence only partially explains institutional paralysis. Another aspect of the matter is the nature of operations and the willpower behind them. If the world is a common concern, it should encourage cooperation, not dreams about the kind of unity that empires, nation-states, churches and ideologies sought to achieve. We need institutional engineering that is fit for the challenges. We need to create new levels of global integration and build new pillars, in which this can take place: political, economic, social and cultural. We are dealing with a top-down

effect, i.e. in the EU (Brussels or Strasbourg). But there is also a bottom-up effect, e.g. migrants determine the mood in many countries. New border dependencies demonstrate the growing importance of side effects, e.g. Poland and the Ukraine.

## | Modernity – an Emblematic Concept, Yet Still Vague

The concept of modernity is derived from the word “modo” (modernity), which means “now”, “lately”. Is the “new” better only because it is “new”? This viewpoint has been adjusted, as evidenced by the rise of the notion of “multiple modernities” (Eisenstadt, 2009). The adjustment was the inevitable result of the changing position of the West on the world map. The so-called ‘Rest of the world’ is becoming increasingly important.

The conservatives believed that “old” could be better. However, liberal optimists totally dominated the scene. Disappointment was growing. In the 19th century the radicals emerged, who looked to the future in such a way that they became the victims of their own utopian ideas and subsequent cruel practices, whether as a result of the revolution of 1917 or other events. Delusions are still present, however. They have taken on an expressive form in postmodernism, namely the idea of “change for change’s sake” is perceived as the opportunity for emancipation of the individual. The movement means everything and the goal nothing. This way of thinking creates major uncertainties, risks, and finally leads to a creeping crisis.

The fact that such a vague way of thinking influences other thoughts can be relatively easily fixed, but it is much harder to deal with negative consequences in institutional practice. Institutions can no longer be treated as bridges that will always enable “getting across the river”. The metaphor loses its clarity, and numerous ongoing discussions about the institutional mechanisms instead resemble the metaphor of the tower of Babel. This metaphor involves a “confusion of tongues” as a punishment of God aimed at the constructors in Babylon, because they wanted the tower to reach the heaven. Cause: many institutions do not work, and if they do serve someone, people are convinced that it is not them that they serve anyway. Such a belief occurs on a large scale in democratic regimes as well. The thousands of demonstrations held recently in Spain, for example, prove that according to the Spanish people institutions have failed them.

This undermines the moral foundations of institutions. People would like to believe that institutions are conducive to the reproduction of what they call good, and that they eliminate what we call evil. These categories are not quite dead (Sedlacek, 2012). People believe that institutions are good at regulating, stabilizing and implementing the political system. Hence, there is no other way but to look for successful configurations within the triangle: ideas – institutions – people. Modernity is an institutional configuration. It is more than just a system. It consists of a number of systems. Starting with political ones, such as nation-states; economic – in two forms in the

20th century: capitalist and socialist; ideological, such as liberal, democracy, authoritarianism; and socio-cultural. Configuration could ultimately be classified as a complex system, but then it would be difficult to characterize modernity as opposing tradition. There is no single modernity, nor single tradition, from which modernity emerges.

What could help here is using certain standards – evaluation criteria for collective action. We know now that it is not enough to leave out “yesterday” but instead, the right way should be shown. If criteria of instrumental rationality are to be applied, then doubts rarely disappear. These are criteria that often find their validation in the field of science and technology. Criteria can be taken from the catalog of individual rights, e.g. from the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789, or from the more recent UN Declaration. These are examples of universal standards of a procedural nature, and thus moving away from the substantive approach towards reality (indicating the nature of things, particularism, familiarity and singularity). They rarely concern the objectives towards which the path leads; they are limited to the rules of using them.

The dilemma is far from being solved, because, for example, postmodernists believe that nowadays we are dealing with a return to substantiality, although dispersed, and to particularism, although not necessarily to tradition. They are convinced that the transformation of tradition into modernity is being stripped of traces of determinism, a call for some kind of modernization based on the Western formula. They are wrong, because under conditions of “multiple modernities” there is an ongoing battle for the future on many levels simultaneously.

Science and technology, economic markets, social forces, culture, ecology – this is the shortest list of the driving forces of modernity. As the race goes on, everyone simply wants to reach higher positions in the rankings.

## | **How to Change Machine Organizations into Self-Acting Institutions?**

Questions like: what to do, how, where and why to do it – are not merely technical. They are associated with the issue of the values that institutions should serve. This matter is often in the background, but never disappears. Partial justification stems from the fact that it is difficult to determine the link between the causes and consequences of actions. Not to mention the matter of so-called “non-causal changes” (evolutionary types), which only become visible in the long term. People mainly focus on the unexpected consequences of everyday actions. This is an issue that has been discussed for a long time already, but lately in the context of the functioning of complex systems, and sometimes embellished with sensible metaphors such as the “butterfly effect” (Maizner, 2009).

The imperative is to look for a new perspective on the world of organizations and institutions. It should be remembered that the etymology of the Latin word “instituto” or “instituire” also

means “to teach”, “to educate”, “make a habit of”. This emphasizes the normative dimension, of which there is a deficit in machine-organizations which have been created by industrial capitalism. People have managed to bring machine organizations with a combination of several features under control. Those features are: coercion, resulting from the hierarchical nature of the organization, and opportunism, resulting from the calculative human nature. It became urgent to find a better mechanism for integration because of the demanding labor force as well as the need for organizations to undertake complicated tasks. Machine organizations need to be transformed into self-acting institutions.

In order to do this one would like to refer to the principles of functioning of traditional micro-institutions: reciprocity, trust and altruism, all principles used by families, neighbors, municipalities and parishes. The application of these principles, however, is not possible in huge organizations in large spaces, and machine organizations are off-putting, because the objectives that they pursue explicitly come from outside the organization itself: in bureaucracy (government administration) objectives come from the political system; in industrial companies from market competition, also external. Referring to values – the public or common good – may not always be effective, but it does sometimes work. Not only in exceptional circumstances, such as a flight to the moon, the landing of US troops in Normandy or the success of the Polish pilots in the air battle over Britain. People may also get involved on a moral basis in various routine undertakings, such as complicated medical operations, the production of passenger aircrafts, the education of difficult children, preventing the extinction of certain species of animals and plants, etc.

Another idea is to supplement formal rules and normative principles with professional rules. Employees today are often professionals who know better how to achieve the objective than their formal superiors. Institutions, therefore, build a cognitive pillar, on top of the regulatory pillar (rules, hierarchy, subordination, coercion) and the normative pillar. The activation of these three pillars together can lead to self-functioning institutions. Capitalism has learned a lot in this area, such as institutionalizing conflicts. It turns out that it can regulate only old conflicts and not the new ones: individual conflicts – opportunism, corruption, “riding without paying”, hypocrisy, etc. or mass conflicts – the production of uncertainty, institutional risk, crises, media storms, etc.

The three-pillar institutional system (Scott, 1995) can be found everywhere, but it is not enough that new challenges are successfully overcome. The institutional world has ceased to be simple. This is reflected in the theories of institutionalism:

1. Contrary to what many theorists of modernity believe, past performance is still clearly evident today. This is called “path dependency” on history. This is noticeable in late modernity, and not only in traditional society.
2. The importance of politics needs to be appreciated. Political elites can conclude successful transactions, if such opportunities arise. Mosca, Pareto and Michels have built the foundations of this knowledge, however with strong notes of skepticism.



3. As a result of globalization and regionalization, the construction of international regimes has become increasingly important. They can enforce measures in state security (e.g. the spread of nuclear weapons), in the functioning of financial markets, and care for the natural environment. Poland has experienced the functioning of such a regime (EU) since 2004.
4. The most trendy are the theories of rational choice, where the subject of analysis are the intentional calculations of a single actor with a selfish attitude, but under certain conditions willing to establish cooperation.

Hopes for the convergence of institutional solutions were given by the old theories of modernization, which can be reconstructed based on the works of Marx, Tocqueville, Durkheim and Weber. Their concepts contained a strong normative component, because they treated the West as a universal model worthy of imitation. In practice, however, they were far from perfect: In the 20th century alone we saw two world wars, and left-wing and right-wing totalitarianism, etc.

Currently, the world is more diversified, and therefore there are no more clear divisions between theories of integration and conflict. Mixed or heterogeneous approaches are dominant. Let us consider theories regarding the economic crisis of 2007–2009. This period is either represented as a cyclical phenomenon, a kind of “white swan”, or as a “black swan” (Roubini and Mihm, 2012). For conflict theorists such as Marx, the same crisis would be a manifestation of the internal contradictions of capitalism, but for integration theorists it is merely a temporary dysfunction. However, institutions have failed, despite the fact that economic engineering has greatly improved in recent decades. How is it ironic that in the USA, the fortress of neoliberalism, aid from the state, which was so despised for 30 years was considered necessary in the crisis years 2008–2009. When necessary, however, capitalism can fix itself. That is why we have still not entered the era of post-capitalism, which was envisaged in the 1960s and 1970s. Industrial capitalism replaced commercial capitalism and now we have financial capitalism. This is the result of practical experience rather than the implementation of new visions. Visions are usually rationalizations of what life demands, and less of what the designers want.

## | Institutional Morphogenesis: Based on the Example of Capitalism

How does institutional change come about? I shall refer to the concept of morphogenesis, which is a concept developed in the works of sociologists such as Alain Touraine, Michel Crozier and Erhard Friedberg, Anthony Giddens, Margaret Archer (Sztompka, 2005, p. 185–191). Archer’s approach is the closest to my heart, because it recommends an examination of agency and structure as separated analytically, even though they are always tightly woven together in complex systems (Archer, 1990, p. 97–119). There are many mutual adjustments (matching, fit) of agencies and structures. Usually these are asymmetric, because structures require the subordination of agencies. There are various forms of subordination, and sometimes for the agencies these become



favorable or more favorable than before. Configuration is a system of institutions – platforms of structured cooperation and organized conflict (Morawski, 2010, p. 70–71).

Let us illustrate with the history of capitalism. After its rise in the 16th century – some historians claim that capitalism dates back to even earlier times (Le Goff, 2011; Murray, 2011) – old hierarchies were replaced by a new one, largely based on material wealth. In the most important European countries absolute monarchies existed until the end of the 18th century (apart from England), and in the 19th century liberal systems began to turn into liberal democratic systems. In the 1930–1970s, institutions that were close to the ordinary citizen had become stronger. This was the era of democratic capitalism (Reich, 2007, p. 5–14). The elites felt the need to care for the common good. This resulted in impressive economic growth as well as social care for those who were not doing so well (the welfare state). Trade unions were formed and collective agreements between employers and workpeople were negotiated. Not only managers joined the ruling elite (“the managerial revolution” – as coined by Burnham in 1941), but also trade unionists and associated party elites, mainly of social democratic provenance. Socio-economic inequalities decreased. An “affluent society” emerged (Galbraith, 1977). The last 30 years have been characterized by a reversal of these trends.

Many hopes turn out to be illusions. Max Weber placed his hopes in the rationalization of social life with bureaucracy, although he himself described bureaucracy also as an “iron cage”. Homo hierarchicus is doing well, and not only where there was a caste system (Dumont, 2009). New waves of illusions are invested in networks – the new genie, which gave promise of rule to the civil society. Ironically, in Poland in the 1980s grassroots networks emerged (Solidarity), which were considered to be one of the most powerful in the world in the 20th century. Today we see that the leaders of those networks themselves have taken political power. I will leave it to the readers to answer the question of whether grassroots networks are currently in power. The fact is that networks are becoming a new form of coordination (Kozłowski and Latusek, 2011, p. 123–136). Sometimes they are victorious, as in the changed fate of ACTA under the influence of a storm of protests. So the status of grassroots networks is still lower compared to vertical networks (political, bureaucratic) and horizontal networks (economic, market).

The mechanisms of financial capitalism are not well understood, but the following can be noted. Firstly, mid-level institutions, such as trade unions or political parties, are not able to meet the demands coming from above or those coming from below. They have been caught between “two fires” and have been taken into the service of private companies. The expectations of grassroots movements cannot be organized in financial capitalism in a manner similar to that of industrial capitalism. New capitalism does not have to take into account industrial crews, because they are disappearing. The majority of the workforce is employed in the service sector. Those who work in production have to reckon with the fact that production value chains are stretched all over the globe. This does not induce people to revolt, even when they are unemployed. Those who do revolt will lose no matter whether a right-wing or left-wing party wins the elections.

Secondly, relationships between the institutional levels: macro-, mezzo- and micro-, are becoming increasingly less defined. Their autonomization fosters an increase in overall uncertainty. Attempts to replace “unspecified” uncertainty with a “specified” risk result in drifting systems, i.e. the abandonment of the idea to make any efforts to achieve structural changes. On the other hand, industrial policy is implemented in many countries.

Thirdly, not only is the mid-level disappointing, but the higher levels are as well: regional, and global. Who knows what new rules of regulation or coordination they require.

## | **Modernity is Rationality, Yet Limited**

The fact that institutions are not up to the task is explained by Zygmunt Bauman with the “crisis of the agency”. He says the following:

The idea of a modernity that has stopped modernizing is no less absurd than the notion of a wind that does not blow or a river that does not flow. So we do change. Continuously and everywhere [...] But is an alternative life possible? There is no vision of an alternative life and imagining such a life is absolutely not trendy nowadays [...] people lack imagination? I don't think so. I think that the failure is a result of the ‘crisis of the agency’. Few people nowadays have faith, in stark contrast to our ancestors, in the fact that the state, armed with power and politics, is capable of rebuilding the world (Bauman, 2012, p. 17, translation).

At the beginning of modernity new agencies were received more optimistically, based on the conviction that they were backed by reason and even religion, e.g. Protestantism. This optimism was also shared by big shots undertaking sea expeditions, such as Columbus and Magellan, the creators of Protestantism (Luther and Calvin), those propagating the ideas of humanism (Erasmus of Rotterdam), traders undertaking great commercial ventures (in Italian cities or in the cities of Northern Europe), Renaissance painters, and writers like Machiavelli, scientists like Galileo and Copernicus (Barzun, 2000).

At first scattered ideas and practices have found a macro-institutional patron in the form of the nation-state. Its constitution (the Peace of Westphalia in 1648) meant, on the one hand, regulation of spiritual life in accordance with the principle of “*cuius regio, eius religio*” (separation of the Church from the state, however still only partially), and on the other hand, support for the development of capitalism. Modernity had become more explicit as a result of two institutional revolutions. A political one – in the form of the Glorious Revolution in England in 1688, when a constitutional monarchy was established in place of the absolute monarchy. This pioneered the way for the rule of law, protection of private property, the influence of citizens on how taxes are used (budget), etc. And an industrial one – in Great Britain since the second half of the 18th century, which resulted in accelerated economic growth since the 1820s. Their consequence was that yet again the West outperformed the East, after it lost its lead in the 4th–5th century with the fall of Rome (Morris, 2010).

Modernity entails a multitude of diagnoses, predictions and therapies presented by conservatives, liberals and radicals. Currently the differences between them are smaller, because everyone agrees that economic growth must improve in order to increase the quality of life, as well as that new technologies must be supported, that individuals must be given human and civil rights, that people must be guaranteed representation and participation in politics, and that civil society must be active. Historically, the situation was different. The conservatives slowed down change and the liberals accelerated change. Coalitions of interests decided whether new institutional solutions were supported or not. The English Queen Elizabeth I rejected the request of William Lee for a patent on a knitting machine for the fast production of stockings, which he demonstrated in 1589, saying to him: "Consider thou what the invention could do to my poor subjects. It would assuredly bring to them ruin by depriving them of employment, thus making them beggars" (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012, p. 182–183). In the mid 16th century the Vatican issued a papal bull condemning the printing press. They published an Index of Prohibited Books. The print of the Gospel was conducive to the flourishing of Protestantism (Postman, 2004). However, not only the elites often opposed change. Grassroots forces were also against change, e.g. craftsmen – luddites in Great Britain in the early 19th century destroyed the machines that took away their jobs. At the time of sea expeditions organized by Portugal and Spain, some geographical discoveries were hidden.

It was not until the end of the 19th century that the radicals started to achieve notable success. This happened only after they split. The moderates (social democrats) started being successful, because the ideas of the super-radicals, such as Lenin, in the USSR and countries of the people's democracy turned out to be an institutional disaster, because they were based on the assumption that the theory of Marxism is able to discover historical laws and the party capable of imposing them on society (in the form of plans). The West has never resorted to such intellectual usurpation, believing that elites can only follow the preferences of the people, who by nature are often wrong, and actual change may only be partial (Lindblom, 1977).

The belief in institutional rationality lasted until the end of the second half of the 19th century. Warnings came from, among others, the philosopher F. Nietzsche and sociologist M. Weber. These warnings sometimes turned into attacks on the very idea of progress – a song sung by almost everyone (Krasnodębski, 1991). Today, little space is left for the old ideological "sacredness". But while some ideologies, such as communism, have ceased to exist, it is a very different history for liberalism, which is evolving, favoring further institutional configurations. It sanctified capitalism through laissez-faire, version through Keynesianism, and through neoliberalism.

In sociological theory an example is the work of Weber, who always mixed hope with pessimism, and who wrote that the "thin cloak" in the form of outward possessions, which could be thrown off at any time by saints, today has become "a shell as hard as steel". And further: "The Puritan wanted to be a man with a calling; we are compelled to be. For when asceticism was transferred from the monastic cell to the life of the calling and moral concern with this world began to

predominate, this helped to create that powerful modern economic world, bound to the technical and economic conditions of mechanical production, which today shapes the way of life of all who are born into it (not only those who are directly employed in the economy) with overwhelming pressure” (Weber, 1994, p. 180).

The unreliability and deceitfulness of institutions – this is the essence of the criticism. It is dominated by extreme judgments, sometimes even bizarre opinions. I would like to draw attention to a peculiar merger, which arises based on postmodernism and neoliberalism, of two seemingly completely different trends. Both these trends strongly support the individual in the name of freedom. Neoliberals – in the name of the needs of the free-market economy; and postmodernists – in the name of hedonistic freedom. What links them is the idea of rapid material and psychological gratification. Thus far, this has been a program of commercialization. How many losses and gains will the theory and practice of stoking the changing expectations of people bring? – I think it is too early to tell. Serious attempts to make a balance are rare. Everyone seems to be focusing on institutional innovation, for example, such as the niche economy (small scale). The more picky consumers become, the greater the profits may be. But how about the freedom of the individual? Is there room for collaborative activity in such a world? Can the corporate social responsibility movement, the environmental and other movements counterbalance the damage done by such actions?

## | Institutions are “Non-Sacred Canopies”

Although modernity is portrayed as a critique of Christianity, this is/was only partially true. Rather, it is an “upgraded” continuation, e.g. through Protestantism but with an emphasis on decadence, that began with the Reformation (Barzun, 2000). Modernity is more often analyzed as a negation of tradition, including Christian tradition, but this is also too simplistic. Regardless of one’s stance, it is difficult to imagine that new institutions could aspire to the adjective “sacred”. A certain German author, however, points out that during the first wave of globalization, slave ships crossing the Atlantic were perceived – despite the fact that they were involved in such questionable dealings! – as a kind of canopy, which should be commended (Sloterdijk, 2011).

Christianity contributed to the rise of modernity in many ways. I shall refer to the arguments of an anthropologist and a political scientist. The anthropologist Jack Goody points out that the Church was against four practices: marriage between close relatives, marriage to widows of deceased relatives, adoption of children and divorce. Therefore, it was for the liquidation of organizations based on blood ties, and thus, for the destruction of the power of the family. And that is one of the constituent elements of modernity, as it quickened the transformation of society from a status society to a contractual society. Let me present some empirical data. In the 15th century in England, only 15 percent of land transfers went to relatives of the owner during his lifetime, and 10 percent after his death (findings by MacFarlane, quoted in: Fukuyama, 2012, p. 267). The

right of women to freely buy and sell property was already well established in England in the 13th century (Goody, 1983). Fukuyama argues that the Church contributed to the creation of the rule of law and bureaucracy: “The Catholic Church, long vilified as an obstacle to modernization, was in this longer-term perspective at least as important as the Reformation as the driving force behind key aspects of modernity” (Fukuyama, 2012, p. 510).

If the new institutions had similar aspirations, then the differences of opinion concerned the pace of implementation of the new. More often it was about solutions opposed to those advocated by the Church. However you look at it, the dissatisfaction with the production of goods with a capital letter by the new institutions was/is so vast that the use of the metaphor of the sacred canopy would be abusive. It should be reserved for the sphere of religious life, as shown by Peter L. Berger in his book entitled: “The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion” (Berger, 1967). Churches, however, still remain a reference for modernity. Its promoters, such as Machiavelli, Hobbes and Rousseau, hoped to use religion to build a new social order and promoted the idea of civil religion (Beiner, 2011). It did not work, and that is why liberalism tried to achieve the opposite – to completely separate state affairs and religion from each other. Did this result in a failure for the modernists? It is hard to say, since it is different for every country. One cannot talk about widespread secularization, for example, in the USA, although it is increasing. On the other hand, some theoreticians are ready to develop the idea of post-secular era (U. Beck). I think that we can all agree that not only are the “non-sacred canopies” unable to cope with the new challenges, but also the “sacred canopies” often are powerless when it comes to the new challenges they have to face.

## | The Individual as an Agency: Arendt, Taylor, Touraine

The individual is an intentionally acting agency (Chmielewski, 2012), either portrayed as self-ish and aggressive (*homo oeconomicus*), or as a cooperative, altruistic or pro-social (*homo sociologicus*). Irrespective of these approaches, social practices focus on the socio-economic individual – a hybrid of both *homo oeconomicus* and *homo sociologicus*. Though the proportions vary, in general the conditions of modernity seem to favor the shifting of these proportions towards treating the individual as an entity. The individual is able to make decisions with so-called bounded rationality (March and Simon, 1964). Constructivist theories are becoming increasingly more popular, in which the main focus is on the actor’s capabilities. In structuralist theories, in which agencies have to adjust, it is assumed that the rationality of the individual delivers the expected results for both parties, provided, however, that the system is effective. I myself assume that the preferences of the actor have just as many endogenous as exogenous sources.

How can the actions of the individual as an agency be assessed? In order to obtain a representative intellectual panorama I shall refer to the writings of the following philosophers: Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) and Charles Taylor (born in 1931), and to the work of sociologist Alain Touraine (born in 1925).

1. Hannah Arendt distinguishes among three forms of active life (*vita activa*): labor, work and action (Arendt, 2000, p. 11–22). According to her, labor is what secures our life in nature, e.g. which is associated with the toil that accompanies satisfying the needs of the family (household). And work is that “which is not embedded in the species’ ever-recurring life cycle” (Arendt, 2000, p. 11), i.e. the artificial world of things, which uses instrumental reason. Such an individual, called *homo faber*, works in somebody else’s company and there is no chance to feedback-control the conditions in which he works and lives. Finally, action is defined as the interaction between people without the intermediary of things or matter and thus does not apply to the individual. People are a plurality that acts.

In my opinion, the presented sequence of activities should be supplemented with a type that is characteristic of late modernity, namely with a “performance” type conduct. The new “hero” works “for show”, and often “for sale” of himself. Theoretically, he marks his status more than *homo faber*, but this is also usually a behavioral technique aimed at success in market mechanisms. Symbolic presentations of himself, always from the best side, are supposed to ensure a higher status. Some are able to achieve this with no professional qualifications or moral values. Here I am thinking of many celebrities.

Is the behavior of the above-described individual different from the behavior that Arendt described? Not necessarily, but more importantly – can it be considered as more activating? If the fields of activity of this individual were to be restricted only to the sphere of consumption, then his activity could be – but does not have to be – one-sided. He requires variable interactions with others in order to succeed. Some may say that in a society of services this is normal. You cannot change the “logic” of economic and social change. It can also be considered reassuring that the social order in late modernity seems to be less associated with coercion – whether by political forces or ethnic and religious communities – but this depends on what society we are referring to. In the West, the dispersion of agencies – people in the sphere of consumption, does not eliminate external control, but it becomes less intrusive in financial capitalism. It does not disappear, only takes on forms that were less known in the past. Namely – uncertainty and risk, which have replaced production line discipline and obedience found in bureaucratic organizations. Certainly the chances of becoming an active actor increase on account of information and communication technologies, but the dose of conditionality that the individual of our times experiences is too strong to make him happy with life. Niklas Luhmann clarifies the situation: “Everything becomes contingent whenever what is observed depends on who is being observed. This choice includes the choice between self-observation (internal observation) and foreign-observation (external observation)” (Luhmann, 1998, p. 48).

2. The French sociologist Alain Touraine, famous in Poland for his book about Poland’s Solidarity (*Solidarność*) movement, looks at the same issues in terms of the mechanisms of disappearance of that what is “social” and the growing importance of the subjective “I”. He defines “social” as that which is forced, and which must lead to the loss of meaning of collective action, e.g. within political parties. He considers this to be a positive phenomenon, since

new institutions are supposed to serve the individual. “Modernity emphasizes everything universal”, which means that it is conducive to the individual being recognized as the bearer of universal rights (Touraine, 2011, p. 126). So according to Touraine modernity has not only bad, but also good sides.

To date, the individual has been belittled by the world of exploitation and oppression; the individual was the negative protagonist of deterministic concepts of human activity: Marxism in the East and functionalism in the West. The dominant institutions reinforced the negative approach towards the individual. They were not able to protect individuals even with the freedoms that they were formally awarded (Touraine, 2011, p. 194–215). His conclusion: keep away from communities (communitarianism) and from a society based on general will; maintain awareness of the gap between the system and the requirements of the individual; build awareness of the actor himself, and never the nation or class.

The individual, rather than community, is the new hero. Touraine also adds that many changes occur within the individual, e.g. conflicts within the individual himself are more fundamental than those occurring around him (Touraine, 2011, p. 193). It is a fact that such a shift is taking place, but perhaps such an assessment of the situation does not have to be quite as beneficial for the individual? After all, it does not have to give emancipatory results. Touraine suggests this, probably similarly to the postmodernists and neoliberals, with whom he never sympathized. This time of empowerment, which he writes about coincides with the period of neoliberalism triumphs that recently led to the open crisis of capitalism (2007–2009), and the current “creeping crisis”, which is causing problems not only for the Greeks and Spaniards, but also for the Americans. It is my view that Touraine is a troubled scientist-citizen, who strongly emphasizes moral and ethical issues, which are indeed clearly neglected by the sociological environment.

3. The individual is shaped by culture according to the Canadian Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor. He analyzes modernity in terms of culture, criticizing the fact that it is not taken into account in the prevailing scientific theories. He calls them “acultural”. He supports the development of cultural theories, in which agents of change are aware of the framework of civilization in which they live. To him this means that, within a culture, specific understandings of “human, nature and good” function (Taylor, 2001, p. 172). He studies the so-called social imaginaries, i.e. civilizational particularities that are significant for various communities. They shape the culture of Europe as well as other cultures. The past has a strong influence on modernity. Since there are many cultures, we have multiple modernities. Changes occur constantly, but he particularly focuses on the transformation towards the rise of a new culture in the Atlantic world.

Taylor’s views are rather optimistic, but the social sciences are dominated by pessimism. This is reflected in the stress on the twilight of tradition and on the development of instrumental reason. This is how Taylor assesses research on increasing mobility, industrialization, population, etc. He is critical of Durkheim’s theory (from mechanical to organic integration), Tocqueville



(equality of opportunity/conditions as a cause of the development of democracy), and Weber (increased rationalization). Could the loss of tradition, e.g. faith – he asks, convince us that what “we had was false”? (Taylor, 2001, p. 176). He associates the development of acultural theories with science, individualism, freedom and reason. In this situation he tries to demonstrate that the development of science in the West took place within a particular culture, mainly the Christian culture. He points this out in a very subtle manner, as if he did not want to talk about it.

Taylor’s attitude toward the masters of sociology is, in my opinion, too critical. All of them, except for Marx, have developed many tools without which culture could not be studied, nor the importance of it appreciated. Without their analyses of integration, democracy, rationalization, etc., our knowledge would have been crippled. However, Taylor does have a valid point arguing that we always need a plural form. That is what Weber and Marx were lacking. Their admiration for the West is well known. The West was supposed to be a role model for all. He is also right when he analytically distinguishes three levels of understanding culture: society, God and the cosmos. Weber measured rationality through disenchantment (from magic and religion) and, according to Marx, religion is the opium of the people.

Taylor is worried about the fact that in the West the individual is a reference to oneself: “There is never atomistic and neutral self-understanding; there is only a constellation (ours) which tends to throw up the myth of this self-understanding as part of its imaginary. This is the essence of a cultural theory of modernity” (Taylor, 2001, p. 196). He is right.

## | Institutions and Institutional Systems as Agencies

**1. Political Institutions.** The embedding of institutions taking the form of a successful configuration takes place in long processes, which are often interrupted. From the distance of time the convergence of solutions can be striking, but the divergence of solutions is just as interesting. And most interesting is the “responsibility” of institutions for the direction of changes: macro-institutions, mezzo-institutions and micro-institutions. At the macro level, a historical perspective, first came politico-legal issues, mainly the rise of the nation-state (from the 16th–17th century). In the 18th–19th century, attention shifted to industrialization and market-based mechanisms supported by the state, which also devoted much attention to finding the institutional framework for reconciling two values: freedom of the individual under the rule of law (liberalism) and equal opportunities under majority rule (democracy). Since World War II attention has focused on the scientific and technological revolution and its consequences. Sequence is a fact, which may suggest that there is some sort of universal “logic” of development. For example, it may suggest that a harmonization of institutional mechanisms is occurring between the spheres of politics, economy, society and culture – that they mutually support each other. All early modernizers, like Marx, de Tocqueville, Durkheim, Tonnies, Weber, assumed this to a certain degree. Nowadays this is considered overly optimistic or even wrong, because modernity never consisted of any uniform bundle of institutions.

Huntington and Bell spoke of this openly in the 1960s. Huntington promoted the topic of macro-institutions. He demonstrated that top-down political institutionalization should precede bottom-up political institutionalization (democracy). Otherwise risks may emerge, such as experienced by Latin American countries, where institutions with bottom-up mobilization – without appropriate top-down institutions – lead to destabilization, increased corruption, demagoguery, etc. He appreciated the top-down systems in communist countries, although he himself represented, as we know, a completely different political orientation (Huntington, 1986). Those asymmetries disappeared here and there – I write cautiously, because a good state is still not a very common phenomenon. New asymmetries have emerged, however, whether it is in the form of a clash of the ideas of representation and participation at the level of the nation-state with human rights postulates on a global level, or other challenges, e.g. is it appropriate to maintain the state as the sole lawful monopoly using coercion in a particular territory, developing rational legitimacy and bureaucracy? If not – then internal sovereignty has to be separated from external sovereignty, the interdependencies between them have to be recognized, as does the possibility of their separate development, of sharing and transforming sovereignty, etc. (Grande and Pauly, 2007).

Another matter is the institutionalization of the mega-level – the system of global governance. It needs to be multi-level and multi-pillared. The significance of private companies (corporations) – which do not really want to (neoliberalism) but will have to learn to cooperate with the political pillar (IMF, WB, WTO, etc.) – is growing. A third pillar is slowly emerging, yet still weak – the global civil society. Its activity consists in, among other things, the spread of information and communication technologies.

**2. Economic Institutions.** The challenges in the economic sphere causes a trilemma, which Dani Rodrik formulated as follows: “The needs of efficiency, equity, and legitimacy cannot all be met. If we want to advance economic globalization, we need to give up either on the nation-state or on democracy. If we want to retain the nation-state, we need to give up on either deep economic integration or mass democracy. And if we want to deepen democracy, we must sacrifice either the nation-state or deep integration” (Rodrik, 2011, p. 24).

Every day we read about these issues in relation to the EU. In response to neoliberal globalization, state capitalism is growing stronger: China, Brazil, etc. (Bremmer, 2010). In the case of Latin America, this is the result of negative experiences associated with the implementation of the principles of the Washington Consensus in the 1980s–1990s. The 10 principles have become obsolete. There is no single capitalism. Every empirical researcher can easily identify the distinct features of e.g. Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian or Chinese capitalism. The market (hardware) is not an obstacle in the construction of a variety of institutional devices (software) that support it, for example, the states. Further variants of capitalism will be elaborated.

The West, which has long aspired to unify the world according to itself as a universal standard, knows that this is unrealistic. The so-called ‘Rest of the world’ has entered the global arena with

their ambitions. Jack Goody bluntly calls Western practices “the theft of history”. What Europe had developed, simultaneously or earlier, was the work of countries in other parts of the world (Goody, 2009, p. 15–16).

The number one economic problem is the search for ways to adapt, which is also called decreasing transaction costs (with the external and internal environment). Institutional analysis suggests the idea that this should not always involve the rejection of old institutions, but rather building a configuration that is characterized by a mix. Modernizers are too impatient. They also place too great a trust in one-sided tools, be it coercion (magnate manufacturers, companies implementing Stalinist industrialization, farming in plantations, etc.), ideological indoctrination, or economic rewards. Today it is trust, or rather a dream of it. In other words, we need more subtle formulas.

**3. Socio-Cultural Institutions.** The socio-cultural sphere is the most puzzling one. What stirs emotions is reconciling identity and diversity – old phenomena, but causing the excitement of millions of people due to the current wave of globalization. Even experienced Europe is not capable of coping with multiculturalism. Daniel Bell demonstrated long ago that every logic (economic, political and cultural) has its historical justification, and that the relationship between them must be conflicting (Bell, 1994). It is no coincidence that “conditionality” is an important term for more than just postmodernists.

Conflicts produce seemingly indelible asymmetries. Their elimination is often desirable, but requires several decades of efforts, not always crowned with victory. Let us recall the struggle against oppression within the framework of collective projects, implemented by Marxist, nationalist or theocratic regimes. Currently, new projects, focused on solutions for individuals, also contain contradictions. Good solutions are a dream, but even satisfactory ones are hard to achieve! Not only the necessary skills are required, but also strong-willed individuals and communities. This means we have to resort to culture, including notions, as I wrote earlier, regarding the nature of the universe, its genesis, transcendence, etc. Modernity did entail recognizing the primacy of the secular world over the world of religion and based on this, new agencies were constructed. If they were to be placed only in nature, then the question arises as to where and what is the place of socio-cultural forces? The big names of the breakthrough, the symbols of modernity were Copernicus, Darwin and Freud. What are the new symbols in the socio-cultural sphere? Is it only an issue of quality of life, confidence, self-fulfillment, etc.?

## | Higher Than the Beavers? Yes, That is Possible with Institutions

I shall return to the statement of Henry Adams (see the first page of the article) regarding the fact that neither individual Americans nor their institutions have managed to live up to the moral standards professed by their ancestors. The assessment is clear, black and white, but the history

of institutional experiences shows that less extreme and more blended evaluations are closer to reality. A positive thing that can be said is that institutions generally contribute to preventing everyday life from being void of moral values. This happens in confusing, interrupted processes, in which often innocent people are punished (e.g. through economic crises) and the guilty ones are rewarded (e.g. the law is favorable to them). The good news is that the built bridges are disappointing not only to those that do not use them, but sometimes also to those who build them. This results from the elite competition for power, so not necessarily from their innate nobility. Generally speaking, it is possible to defend the viewpoint that higher values will have a chance to be implemented only when people find the time to agree on important issues in their own heads and hearts, for example, to be the citizen or the consumer, or the investor, etc. However, hopes may prove to be an illusion.

The Poles, after 1989, may not be much different from the Americans – the beavers mentioned by Henry Adams, when we look at ourselves as participants in corruption scandals; abusing power in lustration procedures; enfranchisement of the nomenklatura, first the post-communist one, and currently also the post-Solidarity one (not to mention the transformation of the “S” trade union activists from the 1980s into party activists, all too eager to change parties as long as they can be parliament members). But there are also many facts proving the existence of models of a higher quality, which could be seen during the Polish Round Table Talks in 1989 (transaction between old and new elites); in the transformation period after 1989; in the adoption of the Constitution of 1995, with provisions that were referred to by all parties in 2012 (while the project was fiercely criticized!); in the accession to Western institutional structures (NATO, EU); in the improvement of the relations between Poles and Germans; in the more and more beautiful enclaves that are a sign of a high quality of work, life and living.

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