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POLITICAL ARTICULATION AND HEGEMONIC PRACTICES IN THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE URBAN ORDER

Enrico Gualini

Introduction

This chapter addresses the topic of ‘institutions in action’ from two combined perspectives. In the first place, it argues that the meaning of ‘institutions in action’ (and a fortiori, as I will argue, the locus of institutional thinking today) consists in the co-evolution of institutional orders and social practices. In so doing, it privileges an understanding of ‘institutions’ as knowledge-based processes and as a social construction, the contingent, processual and co-evolutive outcome of which is captured by the notion of institutions as constitutive elements of reality.

In the second place, this chapter aims at contributing to a renewed reflection on the political dimension of urban development and planning. It argues that the process by which institutions in action are constituted is ‘political’ in a way that is different from and challenging for traditional, classic ‘institutionalist’ accounts of politics. The chapter therefore explores how and in how far thinking about institutions in action can – against all apparent odds – contribute to a post-foundational and post-essentialist understanding of the political and, moreover, to a radical political-theoretical underpinning of planning theory.

The underlying thesis is that, against a wholesale critique of ‘institutionalism’, developments in thinking about institutions in action and about institutionalization, as key dimensions of the social construction of reality, contribute to addressing questions concerning the political dimension of planning in our times, and this not only in strictly theoretical but possibly also in pragmatic terms, in the sense of addressing the current dilemmas of planning practice. Accordingly, this contribution embraces the aim of bridging the paradigmatic divide between institutional analysis and pragmatism in current planning theory and practice. With one caveat, however: that of avoiding any normative rush – as understanding institutions in action is, above all, a critical accomplishment.

The chapter is divided in three parts. The first part is devoted to discussing the theoretical underpinnings for understanding institutions in action as defined above, and is largely
based on my previous work (Gualini, 2001). The starting point resides in identifying a critical nexus between neo-institutionalist perspectives on institutions in action and key notions in use in analysing and interpreting contemporary political practices, such as governance-regulation governmentality. The second part develops from this nexus in an attempt at discussing the nature of the urban ‘political’ in ‘post-political’ times. The third part, in conclusion, remarks on the dilemmas planning faces in relation to the phenomena discussed, and warns against the pitfalls of unreflective normativism in dealing with them.

‘Institutions in Action’: Neo-Institutionalist Perspectives

Institutional Orders and the Institutionalization of Meaning

Focusing on institutions in action reflects the perception that institutional orders are constitutive elements of reality that are defined – and potentially contested – in ongoing dialectics of persistence and change. Such a perspective is premised on understanding institutions as processes and social constructions. This understanding puts emphasis on the symbolic-cognitive and discursive dimension of social orders, and lends ontological and epistemological primacy to these dimensions over formal or structural institutional properties – like their juridical or formal-prescriptive dimensions. It therefore emphasizes the social construction of institutional orders and the process of institutionalization as being defined by the interplay of a symbolic-cognitive dimension (frames, scripts, discourses, narratives, ‘paradigms’) and a processual-iterative dimension (prevailing strategies, routines, modes of interaction): through their degrees and articulations, their interplay defines the nature of institutional orders or regimes and their possible contingent degrees of formalization.

This sociologically informed neo-institutionalist perspective (see Gualini, 2001) is characterized by a prevailing attention to the symbolic-cognitive dimension of institutional phenomena, understood as collective, dynamic and co-evolutive constructs, as outcomes of experiential processes, defined at the same time by their belonging to a determined social reality and by their being constitutive of their own reality.

This bears some important implications. The first is a focus on the dynamics of institutional phenomena, that is, on aspects of institutionalization rather than on static-comparative definitions of institutions. This neo-institutionalist attitude stands in contrast with what has been defined as the ‘metaphysical pathos’ of classic institutionalism, characterized by the combination of a structuralist, prevailingly formalistic and static conception of institutional forms with a deterministic interpretation of institutional conduct.

The second implication is the crucial meaning attributed to the nexus between institutions and action. Attention to the dimension of agency emphasizes the micro-analytical foundations of institutional analysis. Accordingly, new institutionalism is characterized by an emphasis on the ‘conditional’ – constitutive and endogenously determined – rather than causal determination of agency. This implies attention to the links between the social construction of institutions and their macro-sociological effects. By this, neo-institutionalist analysis aims at bridging micro-macro divides by rejoining the interpretation of micro-sociological factors (procedures, rules, values) and macro-sociological factors (structures and organizations) of institutionalization processes. Attention to their diachronic co-determination and co-evolution highlights the nested and multidimensional character of levels of institutional analysis.

Consequently, new institutionalism tends to assume a dual ‘phenomenological’ and ‘structuralist’ connotation (cf. Jepperson, 1991; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991), in the sense – as put by Giddens (1984, p. 17) – that “social systems, as reproduced social practices, do not have
‘structures’ but rather exhibit ‘structural properties’ and that structure exists, as time-space presence, only in its instantiations in such practices and as memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents”. Similarly, new institutionalism assumes a dialectic between their subjective foundation and their social objectivation, in as far as at the centre of the institutionalization process stands the creation of an intersubjective dimension of action, by which ‘institutions’ direct action – thus bearing a subjective dimension – while being perceived as ‘external’ and ‘objective’ (see Lanzalaco, 1995).

Institutional analysis, in this sense, is intended as a sociological inquiry into the determinations of a superior order of socially constructed realities: if institutions may be defined as social patterns or orders endowed with a certain status or property, institutionalization may thus be defined as the peculiar process of reaching this status.

Such an interpretation places emphasis on the role of symbolic-cognitive processes in the framework of a dynamic conception of institutionalization processes: on the everyday, process-like connotation of cognitive activity, driven by rules, frames, scripts and taken-for-granted procedures, which constitute the pre-analytical foundations of practical forms of action and of social conduct (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Berger, Berger & Kellner, 1973; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Zucker, 1977, 1987). Accordingly, institutions are seen as relatively stabilized patterns of repetitive sequences of activities, which owe their stabilization and survival to relatively self-activated and self-sustained processes. In the course of the process of institutionalization, institutions tend to assume a character of taken-for-grantedness (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Zucker, 1977): the focus on institutionalization processes highlights the dimensions of reification and externalization of knowledge, which are key to the interpretation of the nexus between subjectivation and objectivation – that is, between, on the one hand, the subjective and interactive foundation of knowledge and, on the other hand, the empirically perceived stability of the social order. The social construction of meanings is defined by a movement from the knowledge of everyday life and from the prototypical intersubjective condition of face-to-face interactions – through ongoing and progressively anonymized typifications – towards the constitution of social structure as “the sum total of these typifications and of the recurrent patterns of interaction established by means of them” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 33). Institutionalization as progressive taken-for-grantedness develops as an outcome of forms of reciprocity, which tendentially nullify the reflexive dimension of knowledge: “[i]nstitutionalization occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors. Put differently, any such typification is an institution” (ibid., p. 54).

As such, institutions and processes of institutionalization are understood primarily as endogenous constituents rather than as exogenous constraints of social conduct – an assumption which is key to March and Olsen’s endogenist approach to new institutionalism in political science (March & Olsen, 1989) and to a new ‘cultural approach’ to institutionalist explanations of politics (Hall & Taylor, 1996).

Institutionalization, however, is at the same time understood as a relative property, which is dependent on context and contingency as well as on relationality and positionality within a specific field or domain of social practices. Exceptions and transgressions to the logic of these domains – be it in the form of a suspension of sense or of a crisis – are always potentially factors for a renewal of reflexivity.

**Governance and Regulation as Emergent Institutional Orders**

How does a perspective on institutions in action, as outlined above, tie into an analysis of current practices in the domain of urban politics and planning? It does so, in first instance, in as
far as practices of governance and regulation represent exceptions and transgressions to a traditional, classic logic of institutions and institutional analysis.

Notwithstanding its polysemantic and ambiguous status – leading to critique to its nature as an ‘empty signifier’ (Offe, 2009) – there is scholarly convergence on an understanding of ‘governance’ and ‘regulation’ as notions which mark a significant difference in understanding the rationale of governing practices and of their institutional features (see Gualini, 2010). The notions of governance (plus meta-governance) and regulation have gained meaning, in particular, as they have started being used to refer to practices of ‘governing’ beyond ‘political steering’, and to specifically address forms of political agency beyond those defined in a classic, Eastonian state-centred model of the political system, mainly concerned with forms, means and processes of goal-oriented state intervention, in which the state takes an active and direct role in the production of public goods. Such an understanding of governance based on classic theory of political steering, as noted by Mayntz (1987), implied a systematic distinction between the subject and the object of steering – that is, between the ‘steering capacity’ of state actors, and the ‘amenability to steering’ of existing social subsystems. On the contrary, the emergence of a critical theory of governance marks a shift towards an understanding of ‘governance’ as ‘regulation’, intended as resulting from a mix of different forms of regulation (Mayntz & Scharpf, 1995) as well as from a combination of rationales of a variety of agents contributing to such forms of regulation in context-specific relational settings (Kooiman, 1993; Rhodes, 1996; Stoker, 1998).

The nature of ‘governance’ is hence neither adequately captured by looking at a simple ‘extension’ of traditional policymaking arenas nor by assuming it as ‘other’ than ‘government’: it is rather best defined as the situationally determined principle by which forms of regulation are re-articulated – and forms of institutional agency and policymaking redefined – in contexts that exceed formal-hierarchical arenas. Accordingly, the management of public issues is seen as being premised upon an extended but loose framework of interdependencies between governmental and non-governmental actors. In this sense, ‘governance’ can be defined as a public activity “concerned with the resolution of (para-)political problems (in the sense of problems of collective goal-attainment or the realisation of collective purposes)” (Jessop, 1995, p. 317) under new emergent configurations of actors, organizations and institutions that structurally involve decentralized non-state actions and initiatives stemming from the field of economic and social activities.

Governance research argues about the emergence of systems of governance as a process of re-articulation of different modes of regulation across different social sub-sectors, in which outcomes of governance/regulation are seen as emergent, that is, relatively stabilized systems of relations, and practices of governance/regulation as contingent, constitutively experimental and plural (cf. Le Galès, 1998).

Governance and regulation are intended as categories of (para-)political agency within the specific policy domains they co-constitutively contribute to define. Accordingly, governance research and regulation theory share a common historical-sociological neo-institutionalist matrix in their theoretical assumptions and analytical approach, as they refer, on the one hand, to “the complex totality of coexistent forms of collective regulation of societal relations” (Mayntz, 2004, p. 66) and as they focus, on the other hand, on the path-dependent, constitutive relationship between modes of governance/regulation and objects of governance regulation (Jessop, 1995, p. 326). In a neo-institutionalist perspective, the outcomes of governance regulation are seen as relatively stabilized patterns of relations. Practices of governance and regulation concur to modes of institutionalization of an essentially emergent, non-intentional, co-evolutive nature: in Jessop’s terms, “[n]ew governance mechanisms, like new structural forms, emerge from a trial-and-error search process which operates through evolutionary variation, selection...
and retention. It is in this context that issues of strategic selectivity and strategic capacities are so crucial and that attention must be paid to the material and discursive appropriateness of proposed responses” (Jessop, 1995, p. 322).

It is also in this perspective, however, that critical research has as well highlighted the normative fallacy of governance practices and discourses marked by a ‘problem-solving bias’, that is, by a “functionalist misassumption that existing institutions have emerged in the interest of solving collective problems” (Mayntz, 2004, p. 18; see also Offe, 2009). Governance is a manifestation of a redefinition of politics and of relations of power in the changing domain of national-statehood. Understanding governance and regulation as pragmatist struggles and as emergent and contingent institutional orders premised on a legitimating framework of collective problem solving is integral to developments in critical state theory (Jessop, 2002a, 2008; see also Crouch, 2004), as it explores the way different manifestations of a ‘crisis’ of the national-state define a shift from a ‘logic of sovereignty’ to a ‘logic of regulation’ in the nature and forms of state agency and in their discursive legitimation.

Public policy is defined not solely or primarily by formal principles of authority, but by new forms of agency for which a Gramscian notion of the state ‘in the integral sense’, as well as a focus on the emergence of ‘state effects’, is more adequate than reference to formal state structures. This also affects the specific forms of spatiality and the spatial features of state agency: accordingly, it requires moving beyond an understanding of state space in the ‘narrow’ sense, as “the state’s distinctive form of spatial organization as a discrete, territorially centralized, self-contained, and internally differentiated institutional apparatus”, in favour of an understanding of state space in the ‘integral’ sense, as “the territory-, place-, and scale-specific ways in which state institutions are mobilized to regulate social relations and to influence their locational geographies” (Brenner, 2004, p. 78). In a perspective of the state in an ‘integral’ sense, practices of governance and regulation are an expression of processes of restructuring of the modes and rationales of state action that affect “the changing geographies of state intervention into socio-economic processes within a given territorial jurisdiction” but also encompass “the indirect socio-spatial effects that flow from apparently aspatial policies” (Brenner, 2004, pp. 78–79; see also Painter, 2010).

We can see therefore a convergence between new institutionalism and critical-interpretive policy analysis around the way the changing nature of the political is being thematized by critical governance and regulation research. Both the new institutionalism and critical-interpretive policy analysis pursue an understanding of ‘meaning in action’ and of the way meaningful knowledge is constituted in the domain of public policy (Fischer, 2003; Stone, 2002; Wagemaa, 2011; see also Voß & Freeman, 2015). Both contribute to directing attention to an extended range of factors which define and/or influence governance and policy practices in specific political-institutional environments: for example, the role of informal norms and codes of conduct, their symbolic-cognitive, cultural and discursive dimensions, their non-deterministic relationship to ‘structure’, as well as the importance of ‘rules-in-use’ and their mutual, non-hierarchical relationships. Moreover, both have developed new analytical and explanatory perspectives on the features taken by governance and public policy in specific political-institutional environments: the discursive framing and patterning of conduct, the role of institutional logics and routines of action, and the tension established between factors of path dependency and factors for change.

Most importantly, new institutionalism and critical-interpretive policy analysis share a move towards endogenist interpretations of political-institutional orders and of processes of policy and institutional change, re-directing attention from exogenous to endogenous factors and modes of policy and institutional change (or resistance to change). Rather than primarily being focused on the formal or structural aspects, their interest is on the emergence, contingent consolidation
and change of practices and discourses which define the rationale of policymaking and institutional agency in concrete contexts of action.

This attitude is consistent with political theory assumptions which ground a post-foundational understanding of governance and policy. Against a reified conception of institutions as ‘fixed’ frameworks for agency, governance and policy are conceived as contingent orders emerging through the articulation of the various contingent meanings which inform actors’ conduct. This conception requires an action-centred analysis of governance and policy practices as social constructions which emerge through the ability of actors to constitute meanings and to constitute alliances that sustain these meanings in response to perceived challenges and dilemmas (see Bevir, 2003; Bevir & Rhodes, 2003, 2006).

It is for this reason, moreover, that we should view emergent governance and regulation practices and their processes of institutionalization in a perspective of hegemony theory and governmentality (see Gualini, 2010). Governance practices redefine the sphere of the ‘political’ according to a new discursive space, made of discursive structures and of articulatory practices which tend to reconstitute and reorganize social relations according to representations that are no longer available or no longer possible within a classic state-centred institutionalist paradigm. Governance practices raise claims for new pragmatic sources of legitimation while, by the same token, produce legitimation by the performativity of a discursive formation which becomes increasingly hegemonic. Even as it deploys ‘empty signifiers’, discourse on governance articulates the field of historical contingency and related societal forces as historical necessities sustained by universal meanings (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). It is at this point that my arguments on governance and institutions in action turn towards exploring some possible implications in a perspective of critical research on the urban political.

**Urban ‘Institutions in Action’: Exploring the Dis-/Re-Articulation of Urban Political Orders**

In what follows, my arguments on institutions in action turn towards an attempt at outlining a critical research perspective on the urban political. In this perspective, the notion of ‘governance’ as discussed above constitutes a key theoretical nexus. In fact, the following discussion is premised on an understanding of ‘governance’ as summary term that identifies emergent practices of governing, which develop under conditions of institutional uncertainty and change and which affect the rationales of state policy in terms of a need for jointly redefining sites, objects and modes of regulation (Bevir, 2003; Bevir & Rhodes, 2003, 2006; Gualini, 2010; Jessop, 2002a, 2002b).

In contrast to approaches that study urban governance and view its practices (in an analytical perspective) as an expression of a changing political-institutional order in cities, or (in a normative perspective) as an expression of a political, institutionally enabled practice of ‘social innovation’, I propose here to view urban governance (in a critical-interpretive perspective) as an expression of a hegemonic struggle for establishing an urban order (see Gualini, 2015). This perspective partly differs from an understanding of governance as a static, or institutionally established, expression of the ‘post-political’ (cf. Metzger, Allmendinger & Oosterlynk, 2015): it rather directs attention to governance as a series of co-evolutive practices, co-constitutively involved in hegemonic struggles for defining a political order.

Adopting such a view allows one to understand urban governance policy and planning as practices of policing and practices producing policing effects. Urban policy and planning are part of regimes of practices which constitute the political sphere according general formal-institutional and legal principles of liberal democracy but, as such, they also partake in defining the partition
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between ‘politics’ as ‘the political’ (see Rancière, 1995, 1999; see also Mouffe, 2000, 2013). In Mouffe’s terms, the sphere of politics is constituted by “the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seek to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence in conditions which are always potentially conflicting”, as they pertain to the dimension of the political. This is, in turn, the dimension of antagonism that is ever-present and can never be fully suppressed in the sphere of social relations (Mouffe, 2013, pp. 2–3). In similar, if terminologically distinctive terms, Rancière defines the ‘police’ as “the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution” (Rancière, 1999, p. 28). ‘Police’ is not the same as state apparatus, but rather the ensemble of dispositifs that define “the configuration of the perceptible in which one or the other is inscribed” (ibid., p. 29). Contestation and conflict, the expression of dissent, on the other hand, are expressions of ‘the political’ (Mouffe) and of ‘politics’ (Rancière), as premised on the insurgence and the radical ineluctability of pluralism, and on “the dimension of antagonism that the pluralism of values entails and its ineradicable character” (Mouffe, 2000, p. 99).

Urban policy and planning constitute practices which articulate the inherent antagonistic nature of social relations. In doing so, they constitutively partake in a field of hegemonic practices. I understand here hegemonic practices in line with Laclau and Mouffe’s critical analysis (1985) of the role of discursive practices in constituting hegemony. Hegemonic practices are “practices of articulation through which a given order is created and the meaning of social institutions is fixed” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 2; see also Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 103 ff.). According to this understanding, the order that confers a disciplining frame to urban policy and governance, that constitutes them as a policing effect, constitutes “the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 2) which are always potentially subject to challenge by antagonistic practices.

Hegemonic practices are defined by a dialectic of articulation between recursive practices of dis-articulation and re-articulation. The capacity of political subjects to dis- and re-articulate a given situtation, and to transform it into a new configuration, is crucial to hegemonic struggles. The articulation of the urban order expressed by hegemonic practices is always subject to the possibility of dis-articulation as the result of challenges by antagonistic and/or counter-hegemonic practices. Conversely, there is always the possibility of a re-articulation of an order as result of the re-appropriation of elements of social antagonism within hegemonic practices. This is the nature of hegemonic practices: that of a discursive struggle for meaning and for its social validation, for the establishment of “an order of the visible and the sayable” (Rancière, 1999, p. 29) in a field of differently constituted subject positions.

In this perspective, antagonism and hegemony are necessary and dialectically interrelated dimensions of the political in a struggle for establishing and for questioning a contingent political order. While practices of social antagonism develop forms of dis-articulation which challenge the urban order, urban policy and planning develop practices which attempt a re-articulation of this order.

‘Governance Innovation’ and Hegemonic Practices

The perspective sketched above allows one to view ‘governance innovation’ as a set of policy and planning practices by which the hegemonic articulation of an urban order is attempted and possibly contingently realized.

In a context where no ‘fixed’ or institutionalized framework for agency is given, governance is experimental and emergent. This conception is in line with an anti-foundational

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understanding of governance practices. Following Bevir and Rhodes (Bevir, 2003; Bevir & Rhodes, 2003, 2006), and leaning on Rancière’s notion of ‘police’ (Rancière, 1999), I understand governance and planning as constituents of an emergent policing order. Against a reified conception of institutions as ‘fixed’ frameworks for agency, this implies adopting an agency-centred analysis of governance practices. In a context of ‘decenteredness’ and indeterminacy, governance and planning are constituted by assemblages of practices, narratives and beliefs by which actors attempt to constitute meanings, and alliances that sustain these meanings, in response to arising challenges and dilemmas.

These challenges and dilemmas include facing antagonistic and counter-hegemonic movements. Insurgent urban practices have gained much attention in critical urban studies. In particular, the appropriation of urban spaces is seen a key performative moment of political affirmation and of reconstitution of the political. In line with this interpretation, counter-hegemonic urban movements, as constitutive of ‘spaces of resistance’, highlight their conflicting relationship with the unidirectional model of urban development driven by neo-liberalization tendencies. Claims for urban space are an important part of counter-hegemonic mobilizations to address social problems and social inequalities through challenging hegemonic power (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Rancière, 1995, 1999), both from a historical perspective (Castells, 1983) and in the context of neo-liberal trends in urban policies (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Leitner, Peck & Sheppard, 2006). As such, they are seen as contributing to a re-politicization of urban space (Dikeç, 2007; Holston, 2008; Swyngedouw, 2009, 2011).

However, little attention has been devoted yet to exploring the evolutionary nature of current urban governance in terms of its capacity to appropriate and transform these tensions within its practices. As critical contributions to the analysis of ‘neo-liberal’ urban policy practices highlight, this reading is consistent with an interpretation of neo-liberalism as a polyvalent emergent construct (Jessop, 2002b, p. 453) involving not only strategic-relational practices of restructuring market-state relations and establishing new patterns of economic, political and social organization, but also developing complex discursive formations in their support.

The features of advanced phases of neo-liberalization processes define it as a ‘roll-out neo-liberalism’ that addresses the reconstruction of new modes of regulation, by which “[r]egulatory landscapes are continually made and remade through this intense, politically contested interaction between inherited institutional forms and policy frameworks and emergent strategies of state spatial regulation” (Brenner & Theodore, 2002, p. 356).

According to such a reading, neo-liberal policies increasingly include moments of active co-optation and the incorporation of democratic rhetoric and practices in order to function, by the same token providing sources of legitimation (Purcell, 2009) and ‘neutralizing’ the subversive contents of counter-hegemonic movements (Mouffe, 2013). Neo-liberalism can be interpreted therefore as “a process of discursive re-articulation of existing discourses and practices” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 73), capable of realizing a ‘transition’ in terms of an outcome of hegemonic intervention (see Boltanski & Chiappello, 2005). In relation to practices of urban governance, following Mouffe, I refer to the Gramscian notion of ‘hegemony through neutralization’ to capture situations where claims which challenge an established hegemonic order are institutionally re-incorporated. In Gramscian terms, such practices of ‘hegemony through neutralization’ realize “a situation where demands which challenge the hegemonic order are appropriated by the existing system so as to satisfy them in a way that neutralizes their subversive potential” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 73).

This is, in a critical-interpretive perspective, the meaning I attach to the notion of ‘innovative’ practices of governance. Notwithstanding the possibility of assessing their prospects and outcomes – based on consensual sets of normative criteria and values – in terms of ‘social innovation’ (Moulaert et al., 2013), ‘governance innovation’ constitutes a re-articulation of a
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challenged order which may result in (contingently) realizing governing effects. It is a practice of governmentality which may (contingently) succeed in re-establishing, within a contested hegemonic field, an “order of the visible and the sayable” (Rancière, 1999, p. 29) and, by extension, of the feasible.

‘Governance innovation’ operates a re-articulation of the urban order by means of translation, that is, of assemblages of practices, narratives and beliefs by which meanings are constituted and alliances that sustain these meanings are realized. This argument can be developed along the three ensuing areas of reasoning.

**Governance Practices as Moments of Institutionalization**

This chapter moves from an understanding of policy objects and problems as argumentative and discursive constructs (Fischer, 2003; Hajer, 1993), and from an understanding of a policy as a claim resulting from processes of fact-object building that co-define and uphold this claim to the objectivation-reification and discursive institutionalization of such constructs (see Hajer, 1994; Gualini, 2001). A policy as a claim thus embodies both a set of interests and goals and the way they are argumentatively and discursively constructed as a fact-object. This definition has two implications: On the one hand, a policy thus defined is the outcome of performative acts, resulting from a contingent combination of different forms of agency, which institute a policy as an interpretive construct amenable to collective recognition and appropriation, as a fact-object, within an institutional environment. As such, the form a policy takes is not necessarily the expression of predefined rationales or preferences. On the contrary it is largely a matter of interpretation, translation, sense-making and rationalization by actors involved in struggles for constructing and upholding a claim. On the other hand, a policy thus defined potentially constitutes a moment of institutionalization. This is, in my view, in line with a constructivist understanding of policymaking and governance (Bevir & Rhodes, 2006; Kingdon, 1984) but also with a line of reasoning in governance studies which understands policies and their instrumentation, their tools and modes of operation, beyond purely ‘instrumental’ assumptions. On this view, public policy instruments reveal “a (fairly explicit) theorization of the relationships between the governing and the governed”, and “constitute a condensed and finalized form of knowledge about social control and ways of exercising it”. Far from being neutral devices, they create specific effects “which structure public policy according to their own logic”. They are devices in both a technical and social sense, in that they organize specific social relations, have political effects and shape power relations, according to the representations and meanings they convey (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007, p. 3, p. 11).

In such an extended perspective, a policy can be seen as a moment of institutionalization, emerging as an outcome of the performative acts that define a policy as a fact-object.

This leads to two interim observations. First, both the structuring and organizing dimension and the symbolic-cognitive dimension appear as indivisible in defining a policy. Second, and similarly, the effects a policy may generate in relative autonomy and the power relations that define it can be distinguished only in an analytical sense. We need therefore to overcome determinism to understand structure/agency relationships, and to look at how these interact in co-evolutive and strategic-relational terms in defining a policy.

**Governance Practices as Inscription Devices**

The nature of a policy thus defined is the outcome of processes of fact-object building. Fact-object building is intended here with reference to the notion of fact-building or
‘fact construction’ developed by Latour (1987, 2005) and Callon (1986) in their analysis of technoscience. Accordingly, a policy can be understood – to use the term employed by Latour (1987, p. 67 ff.) – as an inscription device, as an interface which realizes a number of associations between resources and connections or alliances between actors mobilized in support of a claim.

As an inscription device, a policy thus embodies the complex assemblage of resources of different natures – cognitive and discursive as well as material – which are cumulated and bundled together in order to successfully sustain societal ‘trials of strength’ in upholding a claim against others.

A policy, as it is concretely conceived and performed, realizes effects of structuration in a field of societal forces defined by a set of interests. Such effects neither necessarily result from a clear-cut causal intentionality nor from a homogenization of interests: they are rather conceived by a selective and transformative alignment along a set of collective orientations. This is realized through practices of translation.

A key moment in the process of building a policy fact-object is translation, intended as a strategy “to enroll others so that they participate in the construction of the fact” and “to control their behaviours in order to make their actions predictable” (Latour, 1987, p. 108).

While, in principle, translation is of a symbolic-cognitive and argumentative nature, it entails different strategies which affect forms of interaction and the nature of network associations between actors and their interests. Translation, in its simplest form, involves defining the object or problem of a policy in such a way as to cater to actors stated (‘explicit’) interests, thus realizing an identification between a claim and a fact-object and associating actors to it; it may also involve realizing argumentative ‘detours’ as a new rendering of others’ interests that recognizes their alignment to a claim by persuasively representing the detour as inevitable to others’ interests (Latour, 1987, pp. 110–112). But it may also involve more distinctively transformative practices of reshuffling others’ stated (‘explicit’) interests through tactics of displacement (Latour, 1987, pp. 114–116). Translation acts by re-articulating the forms of knowledge and interests relevant for fact-object building; by enrolling and binding actors through an articulation of their interests, and by building new associations through adaptations and shifts in their relationships and definitions (Latour, 2005).

Through practices of translation, articulation-proposition, and association-substitution, interests and the understandings and meanings attached to them by actors are tied to a policy, which comes to perform as a device that holds together new alliances and redefines inside/ outside relationships.

A policy as an inscription device realizes associations – that is, it associates actors and their interests “in such a way that they make others do things” (Latour, 2005, p. 107), through chains of mediated transformations of their claims. A policy seen as an inscription device presents thus an analogy to the relationship Latour conceives between ‘sociogram’ and ‘technogram’. To paraphrase Latour’s terms, the internal-external division that defines the policy environment can be thus seen as the provisional outcome of a reverse relationship between the ‘outside’ recruitment of interests (sociogram) and the ‘inside’ recruitment of new allies (technogram). The policy environment thus defined is a system of alliances held together by a policy device. Similar to a black box, a policy “when it is successful, concentrates in itself the largest number of hardest associations” (Latour, 1987, p. 139).

Through chains of translations, a fact-object construction is corroborated and, in a sociological neo-institutionalist perspective, ‘institutionalized’ – as far as possible – ‘becoming indispensable’, as it holds together a number of associations, enrols relevant actors and their interests, lets them be perceived as pursuable only within its framework, and thus makes such enrolment inescapable.
Governance Practices as Strategic-Relational Claims

Viewing policies as inscription devices directs attention to three relevant aspects of policy-making. First, a policy as an inscription device is premised on translation – that is, on the symbolic-cognitive enrolment of ‘others’ and other’s strategies and the capacity to influence their behaviour in view of achieving their own strategy. This implies more or less explicit negotiations on meanings that require readiness to extend chains of agreement and consent and to adapt strategies according to this. Second, a policy as an inscription device is premised on the capacity of ‘framing’, of realizing effects of ‘frame alignment’ among actors and their interest definitions and understandings. Viewed from the perspective of its institutional embeddedness, it is premised on institutional practices of frame resonance which ultimately may produce (selective) effects of frame alignment within an institutionalized framework (Snow et al., 1986; Snow & Benford, 1988). Third, a policy as an inscription device is both a strategic and a relational construct, always contingent on the co-evolutionary relationship between structural context and specific forms of agency, re-acting to and exerting structuration effects on it. Understanding policies as a moment of institutionalization requires moving beyond an understanding of institutions in dualistic terms, as either ‘conditions of choice’ (in an ontological, exogenist perspective) or ‘objects of choice’ (in a constructivist, endogenic perspective), to address the differential capacity of actors and the effects of power and hegemony in defining dynamics and trajectories of institutionalization.

The strategic-relational approach developed by Jessop (2001) and Hay (2002) moves beyond such structure-agency and context-conduct dualisms towards understanding their relation as a form of co-evolution. This means that, in the first place, duality is substituted by a focus on mutual strategic-relational effects, and that, in the second place, “structures [are analysed] in terms of their structurally inscribed strategic selectivities and actions in terms of (differentially reflexive) structurally oriented strategic calculation” (Jessop, 2001, p. 1223). In other words, “[s]tructures are thereby treated analytically as strategic in their form, content, and operation; and actions are thereby treated analytically as structured, more or less context sensitive, and structuring” (Jessop, 2001, p. 1223).

This ‘methodological relationalism’ implies treating social phenomena – including policies and governance forms – as social relations (Jessop, 2001, p. 1223) in specific spatio-temporal as well as broadly ‘institutional’ contexts.

In this perspective, ‘agency’ is not seen as equal to unconstrained strategic intentionality, but rather as the “possibility of reflection on the part of individual or collective actors about the strategic selectivities inscribed within structures so that they come to orient their strategies and tactics in the light of their understanding of the current conjuncture and their ‘feel of the game’. This can (but need not) extend to self-reflection about the identities and interests that orient their strategies”. Similarly, in viewing ‘structure(s)’, the focus is on the “tendency for specific structures and structural configurations to reinforce selectively specific forms of action, tactics, or strategies and to discourage others” (Jessop, 2001, p. 1224).

Policies intended as strategic-relational constructs are an outcome of the mutual interplay of selectivity-reflexivity, and their ‘structured coherence’ an outcome of their co-evolution over time. As such, their ‘structured coherence’ is always only tendential, since achieving it involves “a structurally inscribed strategic selectivity that rewards actions that are compatible with the recursive reproduction of the structure(s) in question” (Jessop, 2001, p. 1225).

Given that there is always scope for external as well as internal contradictions – deviant behaviour, strategic-cognitive uncertainty, ambiguity, instrumental inadequacy, as well as controversy, contestation and antagonism – the capacity of actors to reflexively (re-)constitute institutions
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or, in my terms, to constitute a policy as a moment of institutionalization, is constrained: it “depends both on the changing selectivities of given institutions and on their own changing opportunities to engage in strategic action” (Jessop, 2001, p. 1226). On the one hand, “the scope for the reflexive reorganization of structural configurations is subject to structurally inscribed strategic selectivity (and thus has path-dependent and path-shaping aspects)”; on the other hand, “the recursive selection of strategies and tactics depends on individual, collective or organizational learning capacities and on the ‘experiences’ resulting from the pursuit of different strategies and tactics in different conjunctures” (Jessop, 2001, p. 1224).

In the critical-interpretive perspective pursued in this chapter, this highlights two issues. On the one hand, the trajectories of evolution a policy may take depend on a capacity of strategic reflexivity, intended as the actors’ capacity of effective response to strategic-relational ‘trials of strength’. On the other hand, such strategic reflexivity may depend on capacities of reflexive framing — that is, on the actors’ capacity of reframing and of realizing effects of frame alignment in response to strategic-relational challenges. In this sense, a policy can be seen as a strategic-relational claim, as an argumentative and discursive construct that is upheld and corroborated — in a hegemonic sense — through reflexive adaptation to strategic-relational challenges.

Provisional Conclusions and Critical Perspectives

This chapter has presented some arguments on ‘institutions in action’ based on, first, identifying a nexus between institutional theory and critical governance research and, second, on discussing their contribution to redefining the meaning of the ‘political’ in ‘post-political’ times. In this very tentative and preliminary exploration, urban governance and regulation have been viewed as part of processes that contribute to the institutionalization of an urban order: in other words, as practices of policing and producing policing effects. Urban policy and planning are practices which articulate the inherent antagonistic nature of social relations. In doing so, they constitutively partake in a field of hegemonic practices, intended as practices of articulation which create social orders and social meanings. The policing order that urban policy and planning constitute is a temporary and precarious articulation of practices always potentially subject to antagonistic challenges. As such, hegemonic practices stand in a dialectic of dis-articulation and re-articulation. The articulation of an urban order is always subject to possible dis-articulation as a result of antagonistic and/or counter-hegemonic practices. Conversely, re-articulation of an order is always possible as a result of the re-appropriation of antagonistic elements within hegemonic practices. This perspective allows one to view ‘governance innovation’ as a set of practices by which this articulation is attempted and possibly realized. In a context of indeterminacy and decenteredness, where no ‘fixed’ or institutionalized framework for agency is given, governance operates a strategic-relational re-articulation of the urban order by means of translation — that is, through assemblages of practices, narratives and beliefs by which meanings are constituted and alliances that sustain these meanings realized. Thus, ‘governance innovation’ may operate a translation of elements of antagonistic dis-articulation into elements of a new ‘policing order’.

This conception also directs attention to the dimension of governmentality involved in developments of forms of governance and regulation and to the way it informs current understandings of the domain of democratic politics: a critical perspective on institutions in action — as they are instantiated in and by contemporary governance and policy practices — may well serve as a contribution to a critical engagement with the meaning of ‘the political’ in ‘post-political’ times. As long as we can conceive of governance and policy practices as constitutive of an emerging ‘policing order’, we are reminded of the fact that the domain of democratic politics
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is not exhausted by its formal structures, rules and guarantees – that is, by its ‘formal constitution’ – but is the more so defined by actual social practices – that is, by its ‘material constitution’ with its variegated symbolic-cognitive and discursive frames of reference. Institutions in action, according to this view, are an expression of the political intended as a field of ‘hegemonic practices’ – that is, of the practices of symbolic-cognitive and discursive articulation through which a given order is created and a meaning is conferred to social institutions and ‘fixed’. Such a hegemonic order is constitutively temporary and precarious in as far as it results from the articulation of contingent practices: always facing the possibility of dis-articulation as result of challenge by antagonistic and/or counter-hegemonic practices, but also always facing the possibility of re-articulation as result of re-appropriation within hegemonic practices.

As far as openness is granted for articulating critique to a given order, and as far as no ‘closure’ of the ‘political’ is given, practices of dis-articulation/re-articulation within a field of ‘hegemonic practices’ are always possible and may inform strategies and tactics aimed at transforming a given institutional (hegemonic) order. Similarly, however, forms of resistance to change are also always possible, and result from forms of hegemonic intervention, by which emerging challenges to the hegemonic order are re-appropriated within an existing order – in a process of ‘hegemony through neutralization’ – in order to adapt and neutralize their counter-hegemonic potential.

This reminds us of the fact that institutions in action – as the expression of the contingent and co-evolutionary nature of institutional orders – are always the result of a struggle involving a significant meaning-making dimension. In this perspective, received notions from classic institutionalism such as ‘institutional reforms’, ‘institutional design’ or ‘institutional innovation’ – and their derivatives, such as ‘policy design’ and ‘governance’ or ‘social innovation’ – appear as nothing but contingent forms under which the ongoing struggle for hegemonic order is conducted. In these notions, the idea of acting on institutions as the ‘structures’ or as the ‘context’ (constraining/enabling) in which agency takes place, mistakes – or misrepresents – the fact that institutions in action define ‘context’ as the pattern of relations and meanings developed by actors through their interactions which may become relatively stabilized or de-stabilized according to the way hegemonic practices are played out in a contingent moment in space-time.

In a critical-reflective planning perspective that aims at reconciling institutional thinking and philosophical pragmatism, and at overcoming the divide between institutional determinants and pragmatic imperatives, thinking in terms of institutions in action offers significant theoretical clues as it unveils significant dilemmas. In essence, such dilemmas reside in the normative aspiration for planning – in its pursuit of ‘progressive’ goals – to be capable of intentionally, purposefully dealing with ‘institutions in action’ as an object of (meta-)intervention. The fallacy of this aspiration resides in the way planning practices, in pursuing such aspirations, are prone to adopt an action frame of ‘institutional reform’ or ‘design’ – thus either failing to recognize the dialectic of the hegemonic practices of which they are part, or failing to play a hegemonic role altogether. In other words, the fallacy resides in the fact that practices of ‘institutional reform’ or ‘design’ are prone to reproducing hegemonic practices instead of acting on their transformation – and ultimately of failing its own intents. As in the chess metaphor used, among others, by Umberto Eco, this is a case for a ‘knight’s move’: for combining ‘requisite irony’ (Jessop, 2003), openness to contradiction and non-linear, abductive reasoning.

References


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PART 2

Institutional Innovation