

## Institutional Autonomy and Political Action<sup>1</sup>

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Since at least after the Second World War and the subsequent establishment of democratic rule across Western Europe and much of Latin America a central concern of empirical political science has been to identify the conditions favorable from the point of view of the maintenance of democratic regimes. The task of the inquiry has been understood as specifying the social, economic or cultural factors that tend to have an influence on the success or failure of democratic institutions. The unfolding efforts by political scientists have resulted in the single largest body of data in the field of comparative politics as well as in the emergence of such new disciplines as political sociology. No one who seeks to reflect on the preconditions of democratic politics can reasonably discard these findings as irrelevant or hope to avoid taking seriously the suggested links between political phenomena and various other spheres of human co-existence. Yet I shall try to argue in this paper that there is something profoundly paradoxical about this enterprise. Implicit in the whole theoretical concern about the success of democracy is the normative assumption that democracy is a political arrangement preferable over its non-democratic alternatives. Desirability implies certain norms of action. Thus, one should want democracy to be successful; indeed, in certain situations one might be even morally expected to do whatever is necessary for democracy to be preserved. Yet the quest for non-political circumstances that constitute a favorable or even necessary environment for democracy to prevail suggests that sustaining democracy is in some important respects beyond the reach of purposeful political action; it is, instead, dependent on such long-term factors the persistence of which can at best be the object of hope rather than of action. Therefore, the normative concerns that motivate the whole undertaking threaten to be pre-empted by the actual findings of the latter. In order that it could be meaningfully claimed that certain political arrangements are morally favorable over others it must also be shown that the obtaining of these arrangements depend at least to a considerable degree on our own doings. Failing this, all reflections about the conditions of democratic success

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are of a purely descriptive interest.

In the first part of the paper I attempt to outline the paradox in more detail. In the subsequent parts I shall propose an analytical framework that may do justice both to the empirical findings suggesting that there is a strong correlation between democratic success and certain non-political factors and to the normative concerns underlying all such inquiries. In the course of this, I shall examine two of the most influential hypotheses about the social or cultural prerequisites of sustaining democracy to see how they can be made sense of, without relinquishing all normative questions about meaningful political action.

### **1. Agents, Institutions and the "Long Hand of the Past"**

"What sustains democracy?" The question implies that democracy is sustained by something that is not democracy itself--that democracy is not self-sustaining. Our question here is whether this is true, and if it is, what does it tell us about democracy. From a purely formal point of view, democracy may be taken as an institutional arrangement that aims at transforming the idea of popular sovereignty or self-government into political reality. Democracy prescribes that people living under democratic institutions be able in some fundamental respects to determine the rules of their co-existence and the ways in which public affairs are being conducted. The question of what sustains democracy (what "makes democracy work") thus concerns the sustaining of certain political institutions. This way of putting the question implicitly assumes that self-government by the people -- by any people -- cannot be attained directly, through the *ad hoc* acting together of the people in its totality whenever a situation necessitating a common decision emerges. To the contrary, the above approach assumes that the will of the people can be realized only through the intermediary of institutions.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper whether this assumption is justified or not (although I think it is). No matter what is the truth about the possibilities of direct democracy, the dilemmas concerning institutional design and extra-institutional factors remain valid.

For the purposes of the present paper, institutions may be understood as sets of abstract rules or norms governing the procedures through which specific situations should be dealt with. Institutions, by embodying general norms that may be administered by specially trained personnel, reduce the need for common decision-making by the people as a whole in two important ways. First, they concentrate decisions -- apart from the most fundamental ones -- into the hands of a relatively small portion of the people, i.e. to those who are in charge of running them; second, they outline decisions in advance for a great many classes of situations in their generality, so that no specific, spontaneous decision is called for in most of the typical cases. A certain distance is thus created between the general decisions and the situations they are designed to deal with. In this manner, institutions acquire some sort of independent existence of their own that can be clearly separated from the immediate concerns that gave rise to them in the first place. Accordingly, the question concerning the conditions favorable for the sustaining of democratic institutions becomes quite separable from the normative questions about the desirability of democratic rule.

Jon Elster, Claus Offe and Ulrich K. Preuss in their analysis of the experiences of some of the post-Communist nations of Eastern Europe suggest three possible ways of accounting for the successful consolidation of democratic institutions or the failure thereof. "The burden of explanation can be put on either of three types of variables: legacies, institutions and decisions."<sup>4</sup> The fundamental axes along which legacies, institutions and (concrete, situation-bound) decisions may be ranked and differentiated are durability and intentionality. Legacies (or structures) emerge from "the mist of the past";<sup>5</sup> they are made by no one and can be altered by no one by name through intentional action, but only through the equally anonymous, imperceptible accumulation of minute changes. The establishment of institutions,

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<sup>4</sup> Jon Elster, Claus Offe and Ulrich K. Preuss, *Institutional Design in Post-communist Societies: Rebuilding the Ship at Sea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 293.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

by contrast, is typically attributable to specific agents with well-definable intentions. Yet these intentions are formulated in an abstract manner and are sought to come to fruition only indirectly, through the internalization of the rules the institutions embody and through the long-term results of adherence to these rules. Concrete decisions, finally, can be most clearly associated with individual agents and are most directly aimed at bringing about recognizable outcomes. Here the link between intention and outcome is strong and is seen as immediate in temporal terms, too.<sup>6</sup> For our present purposes, the distinction between the second and third class of variables (i.e. institutions and concrete actions) will not be considered, because from the point of view of the paradox to be outlined and discussed here the difference of any significance is that between intentionally and non-intentionally produced changes. And on the whole, institutional design, despite all the uncertainties of outcome, ranks safely among intentional actions. On the non-intentional side, by contrast, a distinction will be made between material legacies such as socioeconomic modernity (the level of industrialization, public health, education etc.) on the one hand, and between cultural legacies such as accepted norms, dispositions and practices on the other hand. The latter group will be referred to collectively as attitudes.

The question, then, is whether one attributes explanatory priority concerning institutional success to institutional design and specific decisions made by identifiable agents or to material legacies and long established attitudes. The paradox to be discussed is the following. To attribute explanatory priority to institutional design is essentially to take institutions to be self-sustaining, or, in a more reserved manner, to contend that at least ideally designed institutions sustain themselves against all the hazards extra-institutional conditions present to them. On this contention, the question of sustaining this or that institutional arrangement may be answered in purely internal terms, by referring to facts about institutional design.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293-294.

Thus, less-than-perfect functioning of institutions will be accounted for by deficiencies of design, and the problem of external conditions will simply not come into view. This purely internalist approach is flatly contradicted by empirical evidence. A sufficiently large number of examples suggest that identically designed institutions function differently under different conditions.<sup>7</sup> Beyond this, one can hardly cite a single instance of a country abandoning its democratic regime solely because of its imperfect or incoherent institutional arrangement. Other things being favourable to democratic rule, chances are that massive failures of design will lead to a substantial overhaul of the system rather than to abandoning democracy altogether.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it appears that institutional design is insufficient to explain either democratic success or democratic failure all by itself. The purely “internalist” approach must be wrong.

If, on the contrary, one ascribes explanatory priority to material legacies or attitudes in sustaining democracy, there is a threat that the importance of the whole issue of democracy will be lost from sight. A strong enough correlation between some extra-institutional trend and the durability of certain political institutions would suggest that the institutional setting in question is no more than a mere causal consequence of that trend. Thus, institutional design recedes into political irrelevance, and democracy is interpreted as the institutional index of e.g. a certain level of economic development. Institutions could be interpreted to be merely epiphenomenal, and it will appear as though the question of what sustains this or that institution addresses the wrong problem; the issue of any consequence is that which concerns the conditions of promoting economic development (to cite one

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<sup>7</sup> The most valuable stock of comparative data is provided here by Robert D. Putnam. He had the chance to examine the institutional performance of the twenty regional governments of Italy that were created at the same time and were given identical authorities and powers. The systematic divergence of the institutional performances of the various regions clearly indicates that institutional design cannot all by itself explain all the differences of performance. See Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, N. J.: The Princeton University Press, c1993), pp. 63-82.

<sup>8</sup> Again, the Italian experience of 1992-93 and the complete redesign of the electoral system at

very influential example). In a more moderate (and more plausible) version of the "structuralist" approach, it is not the coming into being of institutional forms that is seen as the mere consequence of some long-term structural factors, but only their durability over time. On this view, institutions may be understood as the independent results of intentional human action, yet their sustaining will still be seen as dependent on non-intentional circumstances and therefore as falling outside the scope of meaningful political action. And since institutions are meant to produce the desired outcomes only in the long run, the relevance of institution building is undermined by the moderate version as well. Institutions at best represent the ephemeral products of human creativity that are subsequently absorbed by processes lying beyond the control of any one human being or group of people. In both forms, the structuralist approach relinquishes the autonomy of political action.

The strictly structuralist view, however, seems to fly in the face of much of the empirical knowledge accumulated by comparative political science no less than the conception of self-sustaining institutions. Quite clearly, no single extra-institutional factor can possibly account for the variety of institutional forms that are to be found on the earth. It would appear that all major structural determinants habitually cited as having a significant role in shaping institutions, taken by themselves, allow for the existence of vastly divergent institutional forms. And it seems equally unlikely that a strict correlation between the constellation of any number of extra-institutional facts and the almost infinite variety of institutional forms could be established.

Yet the apparent impossibility of finding such strict and invariable correspondences does not invalidate empirical findings attesting to the existence of at least some forms of correlations. And the evidence is strong enough to frustrate the sense of

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the national level come to mind.

importance political theory conventionally attaches to political institutions. After all, institutions are designed, to a large extent, with the explicit purpose of overcoming the power of "external conditions" such as the level of socioeconomic modernity or the virtuousness of the citizenry in any given society. Institutions are looked upon as the sole means at the disposal of human beings as collectivities to shape the conditions of their co-existence. According to the standard interpretation of liberal constitutionalism, for example, institutional "checks and balances" are required exactly in order to protect us against the hazards of human nature and to secure the proper functioning of the body politic even when a majority of the citizens are not virtuous. Politically speaking, the stakes are rather high, therefore; given the circumstance that institutional design is about the only factor allegedly having an influence on the fundamental facts of human co-existence which is within the reach of intentional human action, a lot depends on the extent of its autonomy *vis à vis* larger, non-institutional trends. Should it turn out, then, that the durability of institutions is no more than the collateral effect of extra-institutional facts, the extent to which human beings are able to determine their own common fortunes would have to be put in a whole different light.

(It must be added that the dilemma concerning the meaningfulness of political action is not limited to considerations about democratic institutions. If it proves to be the case that larger trends beyond the reach of intentional action have a definitive influence on the shape or functioning of institutions, no matter what their political character is, it would be equally detrimental to the importance of non-democratic political action as well. However, the problem is in one respect more intimately tied with the question of democracy than with other institutions. It is, after all, central to democracy, as it is not to most other forms of government, that the people be able collectively to determine its own political fortunes, or at least some of its most important aspects. Democracy is more closely associated with the capacity for autonomous action; therefore, if the autonomy of political action

proves to be illusory, it would be more fateful to democratic theories).

The apparent overarching paradox of looking for structural determinants of the success or failure of democratic institutions is thus the following. The question of what sustains this or that institutional arrangement is an important one only to the extent that institutions matter, i.e. if they possess a certain amount of autonomy. Otherwise only structural facts are the politically relevant ones. In case they do have some autonomy, on the other hand, all conceivable answers must be of a rather limited explanatory potential. By contrast, if the explanatory potential of structural facts is significant, the *explananda* itself (i.e. the institutions) turn out to be not that important at all. It seems that one has arrived at a kind of theoretical impasse; either our question or our answer is bound to be not very interesting.

## **2. Two Hypotheses**

The task, then, is to try to offer an analytic framework in which both the explanatory value of the empirical findings -- to be discussed below -- can be preserved and the meaningfulness of institutional design can be maintained. Two hypotheses based on broad empirical data about the structural conditions favourable for democratic institutional performance will be considered. One of them tries to show that it is various features of what is loosely referred to as socioeconomic modernity that are crucial for the durability of democratic institutions, while the other contends that the crucial variable from the point of view of democratic institutional performance is the level of "civic engagement" in any given country or region. In other words, both present substantial, indeed almost irresistible evidence to the effect that some sort of structural facts are the primary explanatory tools for the incidence of democracy. But while the first one refers mostly to material legacies, the second one refers to attitudes. Below is an attempt to analyze their findings so as to see whether they give some space for an interpretation that is more favourable to the autonomy of institutional design.

### A./ Seymour M. Lipset: Economic Development and Democracy

Seymour Martin Lipset's overwhelmingly influential work of the late nineteen fifties on the "social bases of politics" presents the first hypothesis<sup>9</sup>. Based on comparative data drawn primarily from Latin America, the non-Communist part of Europe and the English-speaking countries, Lipset argues that the most important predictor of stable democracy in these nations with loosely similar cultural backgrounds is the combination of four basic components of socioeconomic modernity. The components are wealth, industrialization, urbanization and education.<sup>10</sup> The stability of democratic regimes in the regions mentioned shows a systematic correlation with each of the four components even when taken separately; more stable democracies tend to be wealthier, more industrialized and urbanized and have higher rates of literacy etc.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the link is so strong for the combination of the four components as to make it meaningful to talk of one major factor "which has the political correlate of democracy".<sup>12</sup> To be sure, Lipset maintains that the "political subsystem of the society" has a certain amount of autonomous functioning, to the effect that "unique historical factors" such as wars etc. may result in exceptions from the rule.<sup>13</sup> For this purpose, Lipset makes an analytical distinction between the emergence and persistence of democracies. Thus, it is possible that a democracy, once successfully established, persists under conditions it would be unlikely for it to emerge. Conversely, it is also possible that a series of events prevent democracy from solidifying, despite an otherwise favourable climate.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Lipset's main concern is not the possible futility of political action but rather the causes of extremism in different social classes; the

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<sup>9</sup> S. M. Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (New York, Doubleday: 1960).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45-76.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50. For separate discussions, see pp. 50-54 for wealth, pp. 54-55 for industrialization, p. 55 for urbanization and pp. 55-57 for education.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46. It is very revealing that in Lipset's idiom the expressions "history" or "historical events" refer to that which is exceptional. Our concern here is precisely to see how exceptional intentionally produced changes are.

focus of his inquiry is the conditions of the emergence of popular attitudes hostile to democracy. Yet it is still true that the correlation he establishes between electoral attitudes and various socioeconomic facts seems sufficiently strong to render the autonomy of the political sphere illusory. Before examining whether Lipset's findings allow for a more relaxed interpretation of politics, let's turn to another celebrated thesis about the prerequisites of institutional success.

### **B./ Robert D. Putnam: Civic Engagement and Democracy**

Robert D. Putnam's thesis is in an important sense directed against Lipset's.<sup>15</sup> Through examining the institutional performance of twenty Italian regional governments throughout the 1970s and 1980s, he has found that socioeconomic modernity is not the best predictor of institutional success. The most important result of his research is that the differences in institutional performance quite clearly follow the traditional North-South cleavage within the Italian society. Therefore, the Northern and Southern regional governments *as a group* do indeed display the correlation that is so compellingly presented by Lipset; the wealthier, more industrialized and better-educated Northern regions have governments that are more innovative, more responsive, more visible and in general more efficient than their less fortunate Southern counterparts.<sup>16</sup> *Within* each group, however, socioeconomic modernity all but completely loses its predictive power with respect to institutional performance.<sup>17</sup> If one is to make sense of this puzzle, one must hypothesize that there is some other factor that broadly corresponds to the North-South modernizational divide within the Italian society, yet one that follows more closely the specific variations within each group. Putnam's preferred alternative is what he terms "civic engagement"; an examination of voting turnout, union and party membership and the number of voluntary associations of the most diverse

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> R. D. Putnam, *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63-82.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83-86, see esp. Figure 4.2.

nature by the citizens of each region reveals that the correlation between the “civicness” of a region and the performance of its public institutions is much stronger than the one between economic development and institutional performance.<sup>18</sup> Here, the “long hand of the past” is exposed in its full power. An overview of nearly a thousand years of Italian history shows that the divergent patterns of civic tradition existing now in each region may be traced back to at least the twelfth century. As far as available data is concerned, the most civic regions of the late twentieth century were also discernibly more civic (although in different forms) at the beginning of the twelfth.<sup>19</sup> It appears, therefore, that purposeful political action such as institution building is of little if any consequence; the structural determinants that have evolved since time immemorial, in this case the attitudes of engagement, cooperation, reciprocity and mutual trust have such a tight grip on the present that regions starting from a less favorable initial position stand no chance of making up for their historical disadvantage, no matter what amount of purposeful design they invest in the effort. It would seem that patterns of attitudes emerging almost a full millennium ago all but completely determine institutional performance at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup>

### **C./ Some Puzzles**

The task now is not to assess the respective merits of each of these theories but to examine whether or not they allow for a more relaxed interpretation of the power “structural determinants” have on us. In the event, it may even turn out that Lipset’s and Putnam’s findings are not in fact as contradictory to one another as they first appear. First I want to draw attention to some puzzles that may as well indicate where to look for an answer to our original dilemma. It may be worthwhile to look

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86-99, see esp. Figure 4.5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 121-148.

<sup>20</sup> It is profoundly ironic that Putnam, much as he is a proponent of classical republicanism (which is in some sense an account of what human action is capable of) after the manner of Machiavelli and Tocqueville, should come to embrace a hypothesis that claims the inalterability of structures. A further irony lies in that while Putnam endeavors to, and does indeed succeed in, explaining institutional performance, it turns out in the last analysis that institutional performance itself is of little consequence, being a mere correlate of the civicness of a community.

at a subordinate strand in Putnam's analysis; for he, far from rejecting Lipset's modernization-thesis altogether, suggests rather that socioeconomic modernity itself correlates with civicness.<sup>21</sup> (This is, incidentally, the reason why differences in institutional performance also loosely correspond to the North-South modernizational cleavage). After carefully demonstrating the durability of civic traditions, Putnam turns to take a closer look at this latter correspondence to see whether it is not the case that after all economy is the primary variable that explains the continuities in civic engagement. A glance at the data computed by him shows that "civic differences between the North and the South over this millennium appear to have been more stable than economic differences."<sup>22</sup> A detailed story reveals that some of the most civic regions of the North showed almost identical degrees of wealth, level of education or public health at the beginning of the twentieth century as some of the least civic ones in the South.<sup>23</sup> In the course of the last century, by contrast, these regions displayed enormously different paces of modernization, the more civic ones ending up wealthier, healthier and more literate than the less civic ones. "Throughout this period, economic structure and social well-being have become ever more closely aligned with the virtually unchanging patterns of civic involvement."<sup>24</sup> Which leads Putnam to conclude that "economics does not predict civics, but civics does predict economics, better indeed than economics itself."<sup>25</sup> The curious fact about Putnam's story is, of course, that which he is not talking about. If civics predicts economics, how can he account for the peculiar phenomenon that the "ever closer alignment" between socioeconomic development and civic tradition simply failed to occur prior to the twentieth century? Without denying the validity of his findings for the period after the Unification, one is compelled to think either that there must be a further independent variable whose change sometime around the turn of the century has

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 152-162.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 153-54.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

suddenly rendered this correlation operative, or that the correspondence between civicism and modernity is more complex than he presents it. He is careful to point out that the level of economic development in the North and the South was comparable in medieval times as well as throughout the whole period up until the end of the nineteenth century. Putnam's presentation of the civicism-modernity correlation, however, would have us believe that history started after the Unification. What needs to be explained is what prevented civicism from exerting its welcome influence on economic development before that period. On this question, however, Putnam is remarkably silent.

This paper can by no means offer anything by way of an explanation for this puzzle. It can no more than suggest a possible direction for resolving it, but before that, I will turn again to Lipset in order to see what is it exactly about modernity that he thinks triggers more democratic voting attitudes.<sup>26</sup> One finds that the four components he identifies as conducive to democratic attitudes do not perform this transformation, as it were, all by themselves, as though they were brute external facts acting on the passive substratum of subjective dispositions, steering them in predetermined directions. In all the four factors one finds, instead, that they foster certain experiences the conscious registering of which by members of the society undergoing the modernization process is likely to lead to an altered way of understanding both their own specific existence *vis à vis* the rest of the society and the possibilities of changing their relative positions. What are these experiences then? Economic well-being, industrialization, urbanization and education tend to lift people above their most immediate communal environment and to put them into various kinds of contacts with people from different environments. Urban life

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>26</sup> It must be emphasized, however, that Lipset's and Putnam's analysis cannot simply be compared without further examination, since the subject matter of their researches is not identical. While Putnam is looking for the social structures favourable for institutional performance, while Lipset's focus is what conditions predispose people to vote for democratic (as opposed to "extremist") parties. I will try to show that despite the difference of focus, their findings are indeed

offers more possibilities of interaction with people of different backgrounds; literacy radically expands one's sources of information about the larger context of his life; wealth potentially increases one's chances of moving from one's immediate environment; industrialization in general creates new means of transportation and communication, and so on. In short, all the four components of the "modernization factor" tend to give people a larger perspective on the conditions of their existence; modernization endows people, as it were, with a second, mediated social world beyond their immediate environment, one with which they might not have day-to-day direct experiences but about which nevertheless they have a constant flow of information and therefore some sort of coherent image. As a result, they might not need any more to understand their own particular situation as a form of fatality, as the totality of human existence as opposed to a particular form of existence among other possibilities; consequently, the idea of purposefully changing their situation (or, for that matter, the situation of their classes) may begin to come into view. Thus, it might not be the case that the modernization process blindly drags along its passive human substratum to adopt new political forms. It is consciously lived experiences, newly gained and understood perspectives and new strategies adjusted to new experiences and perspectives that might bring about a new political constellation. The moment of consciousness is not absent from the change.

One may at this point turn back to Putnam to see whether his account may not be put in a similar light. One may ask, once again: what is it about civic experience that creates a favorable environment for institutional success? People who engage more frequently in various forms of associations will be more likely to interact with people from a larger variety of backgrounds. Furthermore, they will likely have a more profound appreciation of what purposeful action is capable of. Although it is not inconceivable that pure rejoice in the others' company has its share in maintaining associations, it is at least reasonable to believe that the experience of

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commensurable.

success, of things actually achieved through cooperation is a major cause of their durability. Putnam finds, not very surprisingly, that the more civic regions show higher voter turnout and that people in these regions contact political leaders and government officials to discuss policy issues and legislation rather than matters of personal advancement.<sup>27</sup> All of which testifies to the fact that people with substantial civic experience have the sense that it does in fact matter what they do politically.<sup>28</sup> Thus, it may be not so much the structures of civic tradition themselves but rather the self-understanding of the people engaging in them as doers and achievers that is the decisive factor.

### 3. Some Suggestions

At this point one may make an attempt to summarize and make sense of the apparently compelling findings of Lipset and Putnam as well as of the puzzles found in connection with them. The most important suggestion to be made here is that the crucial facts about institutional performance are not "structures" but the way people view themselves and their own relations with social reality. Their self-understanding is in fact constitutive of that reality. This is not to say that structures do not matter. To the contrary, structural determinants foster certain ways of understanding one's situation and inhibit others; the point is, however, that structures or legacies should not be seen as sheer external givens but as factors performing their effect through the mediation of the experiences and self-understandings of human beings. In the context of the autonomy of political institutions, this means that the autonomy of the institutional sphere, the extent to which it can effect changes and maintain permanence against the pressure of structural determinants depends partly on how institutions are looked at; what institutions can do depends on what they are thought to be capable of doing.

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<sup>27</sup> Putnam, *op. cit.*, pp. 99-101.

<sup>28</sup> As it happens, in Putnam's last analysis they turn out to be wrong. If one takes his account literally, it follows that they suffer from a deep-seated illusion that prompts them to attribute the millennial achievements of anonymous structures to their own purposeful doings.

Whether politics matters depends on whether it is understood as something that matters. If one allows the moment of consciousness to play a certain role in the way structures exert their influence on the manner people's actions are being organized, the seemingly contradictory findings need no longer be seen as theoretical puzzles. To return to our examples, it may be suggested that modernization and a sustained experience of civic engagement may very well under certain conditions foster a similar kind of self-understanding, a kind that allows one to view one's own social existence or, for that matter, his social order as amenable to change, innovation and improvement. Yet it need not necessarily be so. Elster, Offe and Preuss argue, very much in line with Lipset, that agrarian societies tend to view social inequalities or other aspects of human co-existence as "natural" rather than as characteristic of the particular type of society they live in, while inhabitants of industrial societies are more likely to see such facts as alterable and therefore as something that can be in the focus of political action.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, societies that have undergone an abrupt and unprepared modernization may very easily preserve self-images that normally characterize agrarian societies. Thus, Elster, Offe and Preuss are able to assert that Slovakia and Bulgaria, for instance, are "industrialized peasant societies".<sup>30</sup> In this light, Putnam's and Lipset's findings do not appear to be that contradictory at all; the decisive fact is not the persistence of this or that specific structure, but the way it shapes the self- and world-understanding of those whom are subjected to them. It may very well happen that within the historical context of different societies, different structural trends will lead to the same result in terms of this self-understanding. To varying degrees, both civic traditions and modernization may be conducive to the spread of the kind of self-interpretation that involves someone's viewing oneself as an autonomous agent, as one who can either individually or together with others effect significant changes in one's existence. This, for that matter, may also account for the puzzle found in Putnam's account; if

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<sup>29</sup> Elster-Offe-Preuss, *op. cit.* pp. 298-99.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299.

modernization and civiness may foster similar self-images, one should not be surprised to find that, when some regions reach a certain level of modernization, the two processes suddenly intensify one another and the more civic ones begin to modernize at a faster pace than the less civic regions. The correlation between the two factors is rendered operative because of the same fundamental effect of both, manifested at the level of self-understanding.

Last but not least, this understanding of how larger, anonymous processes exert their influence also gives some space to make sense of institutional design and other forms of purposeful political undertakings. If the crucial factor is whether people experience and understand their social existence as predetermined or as amenable to change, whether they see institutions as capable of bringing about important changes or not, then it is meaningful to claim that institutions themselves have a share in shaping the way people look at them. Institutional success itself can be conducive to further institutional success, inasmuch as the sustained experience of efficient institutional performance obviously has an effect on what people think institutions are capable of. The creation of efficient social and political agents through a coherent institutional design can have a significant effect on the popular understanding of institutions. The account proposed here, therefore, need not deny the relevance of structures in political analysis (and along with it, the validity of so much accumulated empirical knowledge) and yet can meaningfully maintain that institutions matter.

Political action and its primary medium, the institutions of politics, are indeed the means of in a limited sense transcending the grip "structures" have on us, of overcoming the "long hand of past legacies". Institutions and politics are the means of change. Yet it is true that for there to emerge the capacity for change, first the possibility of change must be conceivable for the potential agents. And whether or not the possibility of change is in view at all does in fact depend on larger processes

as well as on experiences people have about institutions. Civic experience, modernization and institutional success as well as other factors may contribute to enabling people to gain a larger perspective on their lives, to understand their own immediate environment as part of a larger social context rather than as the totality of what there is, and therefore to conceive of different alternatives. By contrast, if social facts are seen as the natural order of things, beyond the reach of purposeful human action, or if members of a society lack a larger overview of the context of their situation, then the belief about the futility of action will tend to be self-confirming. That is why it is meaningful to assert that in certain cases the power of structural determinants is indeed stronger than in others, without thereby postulating divergent ontological compositions of social reality. It is only to assert that what politics can do depends in part of what is it thought to be capable of doing.

### ***References***

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