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The University Institution as an Autopoietic System¹

ALBERTO FEBBRAJO

I.

When the concept of "institution" is discussed in sociological literature it usually entails a – somewhat problematic – combination of two elements: one prevalently positive, related to an activity, and one prevalently negative, concerning a limitation. On one hand, we may refer to a set of functions assured through organisational structures, roles and behavioural patterns, which are harnessed to the pursuit of a social mission often defined in abstract terms. On the other, we may refer to a capacity to resist change from the surrounding environment, by means of which every institution attempts to defend its identity in the long run.

Institutions, indeed, appear to obtain the consensus they need by presenting themselves as a durable point of reference for action and by avoiding engaging in the constant adaptation of their general missions to changing circumstances. This enables them to provide their members with recognition and acceptance, not so much because of what they actually do in various situations as because of the role that they happen to have within the institution.

Institutions are generally considered as islands in a process of social change and are compelled to protect themselves by selective screens. Reasons for their relative indifference to social change are underlined in profoundly different sociological perspectives.

From a functional standpoint, which tends to emphasise the basic complementarity of various areas of social life, institutions may be endowed with different adaptive capacities as a way of increasing the possible strategies of reaction available to the social sphere as a whole. From a conflictual

¹ The concept of autopoiesis is without any doubt one of the most successful in the lexicon of new systems theory. For a sophisticated and convincing application, see G. Teubner *Recht als autopoietisches System*, Frankfurt am Main 1989. On the same subject see also G. Teubner and A. Febraro (eds.), *State, Law, and Economy as Autopoietic Systems. Regulation and Autonomy in a New Perspective*, "European Yearbook in the Sociology of Law", Milan 1991–1992.

perspective, which tends to emphasise contradictions between the various social spheres, processes of change are usually seen as the result of confrontation, where institutions are often considered as an anachronistic obstacle to future adaptations. In other words, institutions are placed between a traditional model of the community, characterised by enduring and traditional relations, and a model of society, built around impersonal and instrumental ties.

From the most recent systemic standpoint, individual institutions are seen to pursue a variety of strategies for reacting to their environment, using specific filters which are able to select the huge amount of internal and external demands which could threaten their survival.²

One of these filters ensures the ability, essential for an institution, to control memory. It hardly needs to be said that this capacity for memory control is an essential instrument not only for emphasising in various ways everything which may be useful in a coherent reconstruction of the institution's "identity", but also for rewriting its history, so as to omit or reinterpret single events that might damage its image, i.e. to "remember to forget". The tendency to channel institutional consciousness, following widely shared and highly selective criteria of relevance, is important not only to the past but to the future, giving rise to an "official" institutional memory concentrated almost exclusively on certain portions of reality submitted to opportunistic interpretations, able to blank others out as if they had never happened.

Another filter is the ability to "delegitimise delegitimation", using forms of argumentation which can give an unsustainable appearance to individual behaviour and attitudes that may be dangerous for the institution. Widespread use is thus made of procedural forms of control of conflict. Procedures, which are often managed by the institutions themselves, may indeed be considered as an essential tool for seducing of individual disappointments and thus isolating and denying support to the ensuing protests.³

A third filter is the capacity of the institution to select internal interests so as to make them appear as an expression of the interests of the potential recipients of the institution's services. This exchange often derives from a kind of institutional ideology behind which there may lie less noble practices that produce double standards, or at least justify the fact that those working in the institution are subjected to privileged criteria of accountability.

A fourth filter consists of limiting the perception of the effects of institutional decisions so as to enable the institution to "learn" if and when it

² The importance of institutionalisation processes in the systems theory has been constantly emphasised. See N. Luhmann *Institutionalisierung-Funktion und Mechanismus im sozialen System der Gesellschaft*, in H. Schelsky (ed.), *Zur Theorie der Institution*, Düsseldorf 1970, pp. 27-42.

³ See N. Luhmann *Legitimation durch Verfahren*, Frankfurt am Main 1983.

is necessary "not to learn". The formalisation of the features of institutional life which are considered worth protecting, means that deviant behaviour, even when repeated, produces, not a change of the regulation, but sanctions designed to manifest the persistence of the regulation in-fringed. Sanctions are thus an essential part of institutional life. They help to protect the parts of institutional life which have to be defended from manifest change.

A fifth filter is the institution's ability to limit reactivity to external demands by using criteria on the basis of which it may "decide not to decide". An institution has to have a shared area of expertise so as not to run the risk of exposing itself in its commitment to act. In both cases the institution may face crises more severe than those that would be produced as a result of single erroneous reactions.

These filters contribute to seeing the institution as a place - essential for any society - where order and social change, stability and adaptation, the world of rules and the world of events, converge. It therefore comes as no surprise that the sociology of law has devoted considerable attention to the study of institutions. In particular, comparisons have been drawn between institutions (families, churches, professions, political parties, and so on) set up spontaneously by society to perform certain essential functions, and those established by formal interventions of the state, which regulates them with greater precision but at times with less effectiveness.

The socio-legal study of institutions therefore comprises the study of the cultural variables able to shape the genesis, effectiveness and evolution of the social and/or statutory norms that affect them.

The above-listed characteristics of institutions do not preclude - indeed they entail - that an institution be endowed with an independent capacity to change its own rules and thus to practise a sort of "nomogenesis" in order to absorb external demands and succeed in "regulating the rules". In an institution as complex as the state, this requires the use of structures made up of a number of normative strata which are culturally linked in such a way that the conservation of one, such as the constitutive rules of the institution, may be balanced by change in the others.

The framework of institutions in a complex society is historically extremely variegated, and may involve not just different levels of acknowledgement by the state but also the alternation of phases of stabilisation and destabilisation in a single institution. The sociology of law has thus developed a sophisticated set of theoretical and conceptual instruments to represent relations between rules and facts in a circular fashion that is taking account of both the adaptability of facts to norms and of norms to facts.

In this context the university may be considered an institution not only in the juridical sense, as frequently happens in the name of its constitutionally

guaranteed independence from the state, but also in the sociological sense, in the name of its ability to remain relatively deaf to the signals of social change emanating from the environment and from other institutions. As any other institution, the university is relentlessly selective in its processing of the noises from the outside world, adapting them to its own structures and functions.

In the following sections, after consideration of the main characteristics of the university system, identified as a culturally conditioned institution (section 2), attention will be drawn to some of the problems that the culture peculiar to the university will have to solve to achieve the effect-oriented "limited change" that is necessary in order to preserve its institutional character (section 3).

II.

The university is an institution endowed with its own essential specificity. Its place at the summit of the educational processes, its vocation for research as well as advanced training, its tendency to organise itself autonomously, and its capacity to issue generally recognised certificates to those who have completed such training processes⁴, are all characteristics – laboriously defended in the past or emerged gradually in more recent times – that define its identity.

It is thus not by chance that the university is given a position in the social context which is crucial and strategic, but at the same time relatively protected and secluded, so that it is not directly and automatically involved by factors of change which might obscure its functions. In such a position, where it is able in the long term to absorb and select changes coming from outside, it may affect society by the paradoxical production of innovation through tradition.

Among the university's many peculiarities, one should be pointed out: that it stands as a "total" institution. It brings its cadres forward from their initial training and provides them, in their institutional passage from students to scholars, experience and skills which are generally distributed by university alone. Within the world of the university, the distinction between full-time and part-time staff, between those who invest all their time and efforts in the university and those who entertain professional relations outside it, assumes, therefore, a high degree of cultural significance.

The basic legal and sociological concept of institution may imply that the university is an institution to which legislators have assigned a certain deci-

sion-making capacity in the interests of the best performance of its functions, but also able to develop the characteristics which correspond to an autopoietic (self-perpetuating) model of institution.

This model is based specifically on: a) the construction of an identity which is recognisable to its members on the strength of a generally shared memory (self-observation); b) a perception of its functions by means of which it tends to legitimise itself in relation to its public (self-legitimation); c) a body of selection criteria able to combine interests coming from within and interests coming from outside (self-representation); d) a tendency to assume the institution itself as the supreme interpreter of its relations with the outside world (self-referentiality); e) a body of programmes, diversified according to a wide range of possible situations, to define the horizon of its decisions (self-specification). All together, these elements require a system of filters to act on potentially disruptive environmental factors. They are able to reinforce each other guaranteeing the stability and duration of the institution.

The formation of an institution in the legal sense is not simply the cause, but rather the consequence, of a process of social institutionalisation. In order to promote an image of independence from its environment, the university tends to minimise possible influences deriving from contacts with other institutions, and to translate them into its own "language". This institutional language has the peculiar characteristic of being rhetorical rather than descriptive, full of symbolic suggestions, and therefore so intrinsically ambiguous that it may be used, without any substantial changes, both to construct and reinforce an internal identity and to defend that identity against the outside world.

The university as an institution tends to adopt a prevalently defensive attitude, and to be unwilling to accept any outside judgements which may not be compatible with, or may be a menace to, the perception of its own identity. Particularly worth emphasising is that, adopting this cultural attitude, it is very difficult to develop any constructive or incisive capacity for self-criticism. The key terms used by universities to describe themselves hide potential antinomies, and so facilitate the gradual and unaware building of ideological barriers.

One example is the term "autonomy", which in the university world is used in a whole range of applications (normative autonomy, financial autonomy, didactic autonomy, etc.). On one hand, it is usually related to an idea of freedom which is curtailed only by the law and thus, on the principle that whatever is not forbidden is allowed, it seems to express a basic intolerance for constraints not explicitly laid down. On the other hand, it is often expressly related to the principle of "accountability", thereby undergoing external constraints able – more in an ethical-deontological than a juridical sense – to limit the exercise of freedom through considerations

⁴ Taking into account, as in other parts of this article, the Italian experience, we have to mention that this capacity is guaranteed by the state.

regarding the implications (consequences and variously defined costs) of certain decisions.

The ambiguity of the concept of autonomy, hanging between the absence and presence of external constraints, prevents any clear specification of what style of action is required, who or what should perform it, or with what criteria for the reduction or increase of constraints. But it is precisely this ambiguity of the concept of autonomy that favours its circulation, allowing it to be used dogmatically in the widest variety of situations.

A similar duality is intrinsic to the term "system", often used to emphasise the complexity resulting from the plurality of universities, but also to underline their unity in a body supposed to be endowed with a typical rationality. This fluctuation between multiplicity and unity does not help clarify whether the whole prevails over the parts within the university "system" and whether and to what extent the parts may act independently of one another.

Moreover, it becomes extremely difficult, under these presuppositions, to tackle the question of the "functions" of the university with sufficient precision. From this perspective it would be useful to distinguish between an abstract level, concerning research and teaching considered as ideal types to be pursued but never entirely achieved, and a concrete level, concerning the various performances allowed in the objective conditions of single universities or by the decisions of their different internal bodies (departments, faculties, schools, courses). Indeed, the generic attribution of the two main functions of research and teaching to the university system as a whole prevents any sensitive and realistic tackling of concrete problems and prevents the development of strategies to manage the various demands that may influence the different levels of governance within single universities.

Similar observations may be made in an analysis of the terms "internationalisation" and "localisation", used with increasing frequency to indicate the prospects upon which the world of the university builds its activities and programmes. The university's official lexicon does little to promote, and may even obstruct, a realistic description of the university world. It rather seems suited to set up a curtain that inhibits a clear vision of the implications of change and hinders a culture endowed with the detachment needed to deal properly with the recurring debate on university reform.

The university, therefore, generally seems to have little inclination to develop consciously any plan to change itself.

III.

Returning to the initial hypothesis, it may now be stated that the recent history of the university shows, perhaps more than in the past, that many of the main obstacles still standing in the way of the adoption of abstract models of rationality are linked to the cultural characteristics that make the university an institution in the sociological sense of the word.

In studying the university as an institution, instead of resorting to linear analyses (according to the model of external causes – internal effects, or internal causes – external effects), use should therefore be made of circular analyses on at least three closely connected levels (behavioural, structural and functional).

We start from the assumption that an institution, in itself able to select changes brought about by other institutions, including the state, may change its dynamics when there is a generally shared perception of the difficulties involved in the management of such changes.⁵ We should focus not so much on the frequently discussed light and shadow of academic life, isolating this or that particular typology of behaviour, as on the cultural factors that may influence such behaviour.

On the differentiated body of academic cultures rest most of the chances of acceptance and practical development of the reforms proposed at various times. University reforms should be administered like any medicine – that is to say with the utmost respect for the possible negative reactions of the body which has to ingest it. This explains why, in the drafting of legislative plans for reform, attention should be concentrated not so much on the technical features of the measures as on the context in which they are to be applied and the cultural factors which will absorb them in the name of the stability of the institution.

This brings us to the important issue of socialisation, which in the university, as in any institution, should enable actors to apply the selection criteria necessary to perform the essential task of limiting change by means of cultural instruments, and to bridge the passage from one generation to the next.

This is an issue which in Italy is worthy of further exploration. It can be said, with regard to the socialisation of selection criteria, that the university institution has, as a result of the expansion of the teaching corps, undergone a series of adjustments of which it has not always been aware. And it can also be said that the signals of change in the internal culture, by some considered – perhaps too hastily – as regressive, appear in some respects to be

⁵ On the distinction between linear and circular theories see A. Febbrajo From Hierarchical to Circular Models in the Sociology of Law. Some Introductory Remarks, in "European Yearbook in the Sociology of Law", Milan 1988.

contradictory. How can it be hoped to produce good researchers if socialisation processes now seem to favour uncritical or even openly acquiescent attitudes towards the establishment – in an often bureaucratically ordered climate and with co-opting practices in which the assessment of merit is sometimes subordinated to the membership to a particular school? How can it be reasonably expected to provide each academic structure with proper management stemming from the teaching body if the problems to be tackled seem to grow steadily in complexity and the skills needed to solve them are not generally compatible with the academic culture?

Indeed, it hardly needs to be said that the emerging culture of evaluation which presents itself as superior to the consolidated institutional culture may be liable to the same limitations as the latter. The culture of evaluation does not seem, at the moment, to be a viable cultural instrument for triggering a cultural renewal that would be able to propagate its positive effects to the whole institution, to the extent that the application of these procedures is considered more as an object than an instrument of evaluation. It is therefore thought that putting evaluation procedures in place is, in itself, a necessary and sufficient condition to justify a positive evaluation.⁶

This may be exemplified by a number of problematic features related to the five characteristics of university institutions listed above.

The first difficulty is that the university institution usually represents itself by adopting a vision which is able to communicate a distorted image of the university world. The characteristics of the university-system are interpreted mostly defensively in relation to any element that may damage the unity of the system. This makes any realistic evaluation of the university world especially unlikely because it does not allow taking account of the various typologies of situations and actors by means of which the system succeeds in providing different responses to different demands.

The second difficulty is that the university institution usually legitimises its functions by means of clouding rhetoric about the effects they produce. The high degree of segmentation of university organisation has consolidated a process of bureaucratisation which makes the management of universities leading to the adoption of easy short-cuts for the merely formal achievement of defined objectives. For instance, as to the declared aim of increasing the proportion of students graduating from a university, the first solution might seem to make the exams easier rather than improving the effectiveness of teaching.

The third problem is that the university institution tends to reinforce its autonomy through a series of self-representations which not only preclude

comparison with external criteria of rationality but also, rather than correcting consolidated practices, end up accepting the pursuit of endogenous compartmental interests. The university's horizon of meaning may easily be fragmented, as we have seen, into a further series of interests and organs, each of which entails its own institutional loyalties, behavioural models and decision-making criteria. These various components are parently too many to be accommodated in any vision which has the ambition of looking beyond the borders of the university system.⁷

The fourth difficulty is that the university institution tends to consider governance as the forum for asserting identity at the various levels of institutional representation makes the institution itself the central point of reference, as if – and this is less comprehensible from the outside – the university wished to talk to itself.

The fifth difficulty is that in its relations with the outside world, the university institution tends to adopt a highly ambiguous horizon of meaning, which may transcend state borders but at the same time becomes active at a regional level for consolidating its relations with other local institutions and their social environment.

IV.

Summarising what has been said thus far, it may be stated that a sociological study of the university should not ignore the drawbacks and the potential deriving from the cultural specificities that the university possesses as an institution. With regard to any sociologically informed reforms of university institutions, this necessitates taking account of those cultural specificities, turning them from possible obstacles into valuable assets to support processes of adaptation of the university institution. Institutional theory supplemented by systems theory may succeed in producing satisfactory hypotheses, in particular on the dynamics of cultural institutions, on the conditions in which a cultural change may consolidate new meanings which enable actors to take on an innovative fashion; on the definition of the borders between transformation and the loss of institutional identity.

In this context, the university system which tries to change without betraying itself, needs the following preconditions: a) the internal rhetoric based on the concept of the system, which underpins the institution's identity, must be able to promote an approach at once unified and *differentiated* – able to take account of the practical complexities of a university system; b) the

⁶ For a reformulation of the subjects here expounded, with greater attention to the Italian university system, see A. Febbrajo "Valutazione universitaria come problema istituzionale", in "Rassegna Italiana di Valutazione", 38/2007.

⁷ For a documented discussion of the Italian university system from the point of view of its differentiation, see R. Moscati "Università: fine o trasformazione del mito? Nuovi significati e funzioni nelle diverse Italie, Bologna 1983.

external rhetoric, oriented to the typical functions of the institution, must be able to support the legitimization of the university not indiscriminately but through a *reflexive* approach which is able to include elements of criticism in the implementation of those functions; c) the separateness of the university as institution from society, based on the concept of autonomy, must be compatible with the adoption of criteria of relevance which are both internal and external, provided that an *open* approach is able to select and combine different closure criteria on a case-by-case basis; d) the self-referential quality of the governance must contribute to overcome bureaucratic procedures and rituals, provided that it allows a goal-oriented and *self-correcting* approach at the same time; e) the complexity of the university institution's horizon of meaning must be able to sustain a plurality of loyalties and perspectives of the various actors, involved without thereby relinquishing a *global* approach which is able to pursue links and interactions beyond the borders of a single institution.

A similar combination of prerequisites should be put in place by the university in the light of a cost-benefit ratio taking account of the positive or negative consequences that such an institution would produce on other social systems. For its part, the state should be able, especially in times of crisis, to stress the importance of a concept of common good which might overcome the barriers of meaning defined by aims, purposes and plans of the single institutions or of parts of them.

It is therefore not surprising that the university has not yet been able to grasp the need for a more complex relationship between training and work. The proposition may thus be formulated that there no longer seems to be any justification for postponing entry into the world of work beyond acceptable psychological and biological limits – as is generally accepted in many advanced industrial countries by an expansive interpretation of welfare and of the right to education. It is clear that, as a consequence of this inability of the university institution to achieve a realistic assessment of costs and benefits from the users' standpoint, the age at which it is possible to start with a professional and scientific career was significantly postponed in comparison to former generations.⁸ What is already implied in the principles of lifelong learning, could justify more alternating periods of study and work, and/or better selections in the admission to the highest levels of specialisation, thus shortening the average time lapse before the first work experience. It is obvious that people learn how to study by studying, it is also true that they learn how to work by working. There is no sense, even from the broader point of view of the social system, in investing about forty percent of the lifespan exclusively in training, as unfortunately is the case for most of the current generation of students.

In short, the challenge facing the university is predominantly a cultural one. The university must not believe in the illusion of monopoly positions, which are no longer sustainable, nor must it fall into the temptation of venturing into fields of didactics and research where potential competitors could more usefully be turned into valuable substitutes or collaborators. Finally, following the wave of utopian transnational harmonisations, it will have to recognise the cultural and historical limits within which its structures could be successfully modified.

For an institution entrusted with such continuity and faith to pure learning, this means devoting an intense commitment to a critical self-observation which can overcome the barriers of consolidated rhetoric, and possibly reaching the level of self-irony. In other words, it becomes necessary for the university to reconsider, from a cognitive point of view, the subtle borders between innovation and alienation, focussing, not so much on what was accomplished, with a sort of ideological satisfaction, but, with a more utopian attitude, on what could, or should, be done for external interests and expectations, or for the social system as a whole. This is a task that seems to be essential for an autopoietic system in transitional phases, when the selection of sustainable change is not confined to a procedural approach, but involves a radical rethinking of the institution's functions through a mutual adaptation of internal and external cultures.

⁸ In Italy, where this age has become in most cases 28/29, the situation becomes increasingly negative.