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## Institutions, Agency, and Change: Latin American Controversies

### Instituciones, agencia y cambio: controversias latinoamericanas

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### Abstract

Based on theories of realist ontology, moderate social constructionism, and rethinking social movements, this article explores the interplay between institutions and communities within the contemporary social structuration perspective. We highlight the role of habits not just as constraint mechanisms but also as enablers of action and change. The central idea is that institutions originate in habits and patterned influences: institutions and agency shape each other, which challenges the conventional notion that institutions exist independently of agency and depend on centralized leadership and the state. Understanding institutions is more than just understanding how people interpret pre-existing normative frameworks: since institutions are formed by collective practice, they are not transcendental regarding communities. We also explore the idea that instead of providing a snapshot of individuals pressuring the state to adopt reforms, describing communitarian trajectories and collective efforts to promote differentiation processes is necessary to reach a nuanced comprehension of social movements. We contextualize that idea in recent debates in Latin America about mobilization and social struggles. Ultimately, we conclude that becoming different does not mean claiming state power or presenting oneself as a representative of the people. To understand reality change and a social movement's role, one must consider renovated conceptual and methodological tools to avoid empirical simplification and causality reduction of contingent practices and communitarian compositions.

*Keywords:* structuration processes; institutions; communities; habit; agency; realist ontology; Latin America; social movements; social constructionism; Dave Elder-Vass.

### Resumen

Con base en las teorías de la ontología realista, el construccionismo social moderado y el replanteamiento de los movimientos sociales, este artículo explora la interacción dinámica entre las instituciones y las comunidades desde la perspectiva de la estructuración social contemporánea. Destacamos el papel de los hábitos no solo como mecanismos de restricción, sino también como facilitadores de la acción y el cambio. La idea central es que las instituciones tienen su origen en los hábitos y las influencias pautadas: las instituciones y la agencia se moldean mutuamente, lo que desafía la noción convencional de que las instituciones existen independientemente de la agencia y dependen del liderazgo centralizado del Estado. Comprender las instituciones es más que simplemente comprender cómo las personas interpretan los marcos normativos preexistentes: dado que las instituciones se forman a partir de la práctica colectiva, no son trascendentales con respecto a las comunidades. También exploramos la idea de que, en lugar de ofrecer una imagen de individuos que presionan al Estado para que adopte reformas, es necesario describir las trayectorias comunitarias y los esfuerzos colectivos para promover procesos de diferenciación a fin de alcanzar una comprensión matizada de los movimientos sociales. Contextualizamos esa idea en los debates latinoamericanos recientes sobre la movilización y las luchas sociales. Concluimos que ser diferente no significa reclamar el poder del Estado o presentarse como representante del pueblo. Para comprender el cambio de la realidad y el papel de un movimiento social, hay que considerar herramientas conceptuales y metodológicas renovadas para evitar la simplificación empírica y la reducción de la causalidad de las prácticas contingentes y las composiciones comunitarias.

*Palabras clave:* procesos de estructuración; instituciones; comunidades; hábitos; agencia; ontología realista; Latinoamérica; movimientos sociales; construccionismo social; Dave Elder-Vass.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally, institutions play a central role in shaping the dynamics of social behaviors. According to Portes and Smith (2008), the interplay between formal and informal structures is assumed to influence development trajectories, particularly in Latin American contexts. The thesis statement usually takes the following form: Institutions comprise formal rules (*e.g.*, constitutions and regulations) and informal norms that guide societal habits. This duality is crucial in understanding how institutions facilitate or hinder collective action. Effective institutions provide stability and reflect local socio-political scenarios, impacting the capacity of people to mobilize and negotiate change. Often rooted in social capital, informal mechanisms complement formal institutions, especially in regions where state structures are weak or inaccessible.

More recently, Paschel (2016) has proposed that the relationship between social movements and institutions is inherently dynamic, meaning that social movements frequently arise in response to institutional inadequacies, aiming to reshape governance or secure rights denied under prevailing structures. In such a way, it is usually emphasized that institutions and social movements are interwoven, with actors shaping and being shaped by institutional frameworks. That notion has constantly been debated in Latin America, where formal institutions have historically maintained power asymmetries (Portes & Smith, 2008; Salinas *et al.*, 2023).

These debates represent the context for the following theoretical premise: institutions are not static. Generally speaking, institutions evolve through the contestation and collaboration between established powers and emerging movements. Thus, analyzing the interaction between institutions and social movements in Latin America provides insight into the complexities of social transformation, highlighting both the limitations of formal frameworks and the potential of collective action to foster change. This conceptual approach underscores the importance of considering institutional embeddedness, local realities,

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and power dynamics when studying the role of social movements in effecting territorial transformation (Esposito, 2022; Walker, 2013; Castells & Calderón, 2020).

The idea that institutions effectively incarnate people's ideas, expectations, and action possibilities in the sense that they express continuing debates around normative representations and the ways of configuring apparatuses enabling control and management of changing environments complements this classical picture (Paschel, 2016; Helmke & Levitsky, 2006; Moffitt, 2014). However, institutions must not be confused with organizations merely promoting normative frames, ethical imperatives, social programs, and reforms. Our thesis statement is that institutions do more than represent organized expectancies under procedural rules—*e.g.*, state public policies. Instead, institutions express the complex dimension of highly shared practices associated with the attempt to manage reality and produce territorially circumscribed living scenarios. In that sense, institutions refer to building social networks by creating habits.

This powerful thought has long been central to a complex debate about how attention to decentralized accounts of human activities describes social progress and development. In that context, institutions are not simply rational embodiments of norms but products of social construction processes throughout history and geography (Kothari, 2022, pp. 13-15; Esposito, 2022, pp. 34-38). Endorsing this perspective can help inform methodological decisions when studying institutions. It is vital to move beyond traditional assumptions about their constitution and participants. Understanding institutions requires acknowledging the doubts, narratives, aspirations, and human plans that have shaped them. Recognizing that no single set of values and norms supports established institutions is essential. Institutions vary across time and space, reflecting the human struggles involved in their creation.

An additional consideration will complement that idea: we must resist the persistent temptation to view institutions and humans as destined to collide through oppositional dynamics. In other words, it is possible to avoid the traditional agonistic comprehension of the relationship between institutions and humans in favor of a perspective of social structuration of dynamic processes (Foucault, 2003 & 2009). We refer to the contrast between *The Democratic Paradox* by Chantal Mouffe (2009), *The Reality of Social Structuration* by Dave Elder-Vass (2012), *Institutions* by Roberto Esposito (2022), and *Contentious Politics* by Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow (2007).

In that theoretical context, we argue around the question: how can we avoid contentious dialectics in politics? Can we consider an alternative to the binary relation between the state and communities represented in ideological oppositions—*i.e.*, left and right, progressivism and conservatism, etc.?

Collective assemblages that create improved living conditions in the middle of institutions and human activities express the vital character of social life. In this way, social life can be understood as a capacity for self-generative processes along unexplored living possibilities, as multiplicities intensify and become different within institutional scenarios.

What does “life” mean? We address that question by drawing on a contemporary vitalist tradition and the idea of an infinite productivity of reality (Nicholson & Dupré, 2018; Hui, 2019). We understand life as a scenario that is internally dynamic and changes through internal and configurative movements. That means that processes involving collective agency at different existential levels—politics, economy, nature, technology, etc.—shape life. In other words, life refers to the process by which systems (whether biological, social, or technological) self-modify based on their structures and histories.

This self-modification is not a simple repetition of actions and activities but a creative process allowing new existential forms to emerge. Openness and indeterminacy of these processes are definite characteristics of life. While life becomes recursively determined by behavioral patterns, it is also subject to unpredictable changes arising from interactions within and across scales. These interactions can lead to emergent behaviors and structures not entirely determined by their preceding conditions—*i.e.*, history. We can see that life is structured by explicit action limits (norms circles) and immanent processes influencing and modifying behavioral patterns over time, transforming current patterned dynamics. For that reason, life is about contingency. She expresses the outside of non-stratified processes and existences (Hui, 2019, pp. 14-64; Deleuze, 2006a, pp. 70-94; Esposito, 2022, pp. 2-10).

In the narrower context of human matters, institutions define their contours and create goals to pursue, incarnating conditioning processes that give form to a stratified life. The notion of institution usually concerns two ideas: stasis and movement (Esposito, 2022, pp. 39-42). We want to add a different one: institutions entail a dynamic relationship between stasis and movement. Conflicts and opportunities constantly unfold within institutions as collective pressures to have a voice and participate. Truly, humans struggle to make a living and politically participate in their mutual affairs. However, humans collectively respond to the need to project their future possibilities beyond their living conditions by promoting reality change. Institutions

are complex multiplicities that create limited living conditions that can secure uncertainty surveillance and administration, but also represent open possibilities to become different.

Based on that preparative notion, let us adopt the following conceptual characterization to make a delimited scenario for asking some essential questions regarding institutions and people's initiatives to produce life forms. The terms "conditioning forces," "structuring processes," and "instituent praxis" describe how life takes shape as a result of the interactions among capable entities exploring action possibilities. When institutions face real pressure, they respond by challenging, expanding, or altering their previous ways of operating. That transformative attribute secures institutional impacts on reality. The point is that communities that interfere with themselves and produce adaptable normative environments make an institutional impact.

What is the implication of that thesis? Immanent configurations are at stake in the process of responding to reality. Conflicts, antagonisms, debates, and polemic deliberations are expressions of the collective effort to navigate reality and to create mechanisms reducing uncertainty and securing social conditions to enjoy capabilities. It is reality resisting us that produces collective responses. That means institutions emerge and change as forms of deliberately and strategically navigating, dealing with, and organizing reality. They are not limited to the state and its regulative status. Instead, institutions reveal *real* communitarian endeavors differentiated in time and space.

How can we understand the conditioning processes giving form (or structure) to life? Do institutions refer to the human ability to give birth to their expectations and transform their living environment due to those expectations and the will to power? On the contrary, institutions are about external behavioral dynamics freely becoming stable by their inner nature. That is an alternative possibility to comprehend that life responds to extended configuring processes instead of being a reflection of agonistic living forms.

Our argument goes as follows. We first contextualize the main assumptions regarding social struggles and institutions in Latin America. Then, we describe the so-called theory of social structuration within a realist ontology (Elder-Vass, 2010 & 2012). In that way, we examine the notion of institution. The analysis highlights how social struggles and institutions shape social dynamics. The central idea is that institutions are not confined to one type. Instead, our study emphasizes the interaction among the State's sectors—government, economy, and civil society—and collective agency, insisting on how communities impact social transformation (Cardoso & Faletto, 2024). After that, we consider the

question about where else new action possibilities can be found in contrast to the common notion that they come from the demands of political subjects—*i.e.*, groups, associations, organizations, and movements. In the context of Latin American debates about social change and the role of institutions in shaping human behavior, we expect that step will sustain an alternative comprehension of the relationship between institutions and people at the margin of the idea that political conflict and ideological struggles configure the essential link between social movements and the state (Esposito, 2022, pp. 39-55; Tilly & Tarrow, 2007, pp. 193-215). In the last part, we employ a comparative qualitative methodology to analyze the critical realism approach to structuration processes and institutions based on the idea that the most critical propositions of the social construction theory and the role of multiplicities and human capabilities within institutional configurations illuminate renewed comprehensions of the institutions in Latin America.

## 1. Social struggles and Latin American debates

Studies of Latin America's social struggles and institutions encompass various interdisciplinary approaches and research topics. Scholars explore different aspects of social and political movements, economic inequality, historical legacies, cultural dynamics, and institutional structures within the region. In that context, some key areas are:

1. Social movements' emergence, mobilization, and impact—*e.g.*, Indigenous and Black Communities' rights movements, feminist movements, environmental activism, and labor movements (Stokes, 2006).
2. Studies of persistent economic inequalities and poverty (Acosta, 2006).
3. The functioning and challenges of political institutions in the region, including the strengths and weaknesses of democratic systems, political parties, electoral processes, and state institutions' roles in governance and policy-making (Brinks, 2006).

4. The historical becoming of Latin America's social struggles and institutions—*e.g.*, the ongoing effects of colonization, authoritarian regimes, and social conflicts on contemporary political and economic challenges (Walker, 2013; Comisión de la Verdad, 2022).
5. The intersections of culture, identity, and power dynamics and their impacts on ethnicity, race, gender, and political recognition (Paschel, 2016).
6. The influences of international actors, global economic systems, and transnational social movements on Latin American societies and institutions (Munck, 2020; Paschel, 2016).

Research on social movements and institutions generally seeks a comprehensive understanding of the intricate challenges, changes, and possible avenues for social advancement in Latin America. This follows the principle that individuals should strive for social and political recognition. Indeed, the concept of an agonistic understanding of Latin American social movements and institutions is prominently featured in current discussions (Davis, 1999; Gorissen, 2021; Hadiz & Chryssogelos, 2017).

As previously stated, contemporary comprehension of the relationship between institutions and individuals is multifaceted, encompassing various fields of study such as sociology, political science, psychology, and economics. In that way, formal and informal rules that guide and shape human behavior within organizations constitute institutions. That notion supports the assumption that institutions shape individuals' behavior and actions (Parsons, 2012; Richard, 2013). The result of that consideration is that individuals can influence institutions by participating in, challenging, or seeking to reform them. Moreover, individuals can change institutional structures and practices through collective action and social movements. As a result, institutions and persons become involved in dynamic and reciprocal processes (Milner & Moravcsik, 2009; Richard, 2013; Mouffe, 2013).

There is a growing recognition that understanding the agonistic relationship between institutions and individuals is crucial for addressing

many contemporary social, economic, and political challenges—inequality, social justice, and environmental sustainability (Mouffe, 2005). That recognition parallels the awareness that dynamics between institutions and individuals can vary significantly depending on the context. Institutions may hold significant power over people, dictating their behavior and constraining their choices. In other cases, individuals may have more agency, and their actions can lead to substantial changes in institutional structures and practices (Scott, 2013; Olson, 1971).

Since the 1990s in Latin America, the dynamic relationships between institutions and individuals have been an essential aspect of the research on social life and politics (Laclau, 1994). The controversial interplay between the structures and norms that shape behaviors and the actions of individuals that, in turn, can influence and change these institutions characterizes contemporary understanding. In other words, the agonistic interplay between institutions and individuals reflects a broader theoretical debate about structure and agency—*i.e.*, how social structures condition individuals' behaviors and how individuals can act to change those structures (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). In Latin America, intellectual and political debates have been particularly significant due to the region's history of social instability, economic disparities, and social movements. In that scenario, a central thesis has been strongly present: individuals' actions, whether through formal political processes or grassroots movements, often challenge and redefine the constraints imposed by institutions, leading to significant shifts in policy and governance, reflecting a continuous dialogue between the evolving demands of the populace and the institutional frameworks (Howarth, 2014; Petracca, 2018).

## § 1

In contrast to traditional comprehension, recent conceptual developments related to social structuration perspectivism highlight an immanent dynamic between institutions and communities. Elder-Vass (2010, pp. 192-202; 2012, pp. 253-264) asserts that structures and agency are better described and comprehended from the viewpoint of emergent properties than dialectics.

Let us explain ourselves.

## § 2

More is needed to say that institutions respond to massive individual demands. The conventional social movement story tells that people massively go on the streets and ask for changes following volition and ideological motifs. Correspondingly, institutions try to respond to people's challenges by designing public policies and laws (Paschel, 2016, pp. 222-223).

These two ideas are widely accepted. However, it is trivial to say that because it invokes a direct and unidimensional causality. One asks something, and an institution replies by promoting reforms (Deleuze, 2004, pp. 20-21). The contrasting fact is that institutional reality involves intricate mechanisms and communitarian processes enabling possibilities to respond to human demands and challenges irreducible to leadership, personal ethics, and pursuing ideological themes within bureaucratically defined political agendas. There are no power-holders or world-changers epically described as courageous icons of well-intentioned institutions—bureaucrats and congressional leaders, political representatives, presidential candidates, mayors, executive chiefs, etc. (Paschel, 2016, pp. 222-225).

*Institutions are complex.* The concept of institutions encompasses a wide range of elements, including bureaucratic and legal procedures, power dynamics among interest groups, community initiatives, strategies for addressing real-world challenges, economic policies, academic discussions, regulations, individuals, roles and activities, infrastructure, and services (Esposito, 2022, pp. 40-43). Therefore, institutions represent complex systems involving diverse and influential entities engaged in interconnected relationships (Latour, 2005, pp. 27-42; Tarde, 1969, pp. 77-89). Under that conceptual formula, describing and understanding the social construction of connections and dynamics within a highly differentiated and complex reality calls for an alternative approach.

Political struggles and conflicts do not encompass all the tensions and dynamics between institutions and people, complex communities of complex agents. Their involvement also implies intrinsic dynamics that do not necessarily respond to an antagonistic logic. The roles of habits, language, shared expectations, understanding horizons, and plans for the future express a sublated continuity between structure and agency within complex arrangements. Institutional life is not unidimensional

and encompasses more than the opposition between the master and the mastered persons. Instead, proceeding from a complex social ontology requires a set of considerations about what kind of entities compose institutions and communities, how they can exist and immanently change, and how they can causally influence behaviors (Elder-Vass, 2010 & 2012; Latour, 2005; Law, 2004).

### § 3

Living beings affect how the world is. However, what happens in the world indeed affects how we live. There is no necessity to suppose an oppositional dialectic—*i.e.*, the concept of negativity (Esposito, 2022, pp. 44-50). The situations at play are more complex than that. How can we describe and understand social construction processes from an immanent viewpoint? If we accept that social reality is constructed and transformed, what is being built? Who is doing the construction process? What are the processes through which that can happen?

We deliberate around a moderate social constructionism perspective to embrace an immanent perspective of social construction processes (Elder-Vass, 2010 & 2012), since social constructionism allows us to avoid lengthy debates among those committed to incompatible ontological stances that have been proved to go nowhere. To say that institutions and individuals mutually interfere does not explain how that is possible. It only introduces an agonistic element (a force) we must conceptualize in reality. Even more, there is no reachable solution to the opposition between the idea that everything is constructed and, in contrast, that everything is given—knowledge and reality, institutions and individuals, and language and habits. From a moderate social constructionism, Elder-Vass (2010, pp. 207-264) maintains that there are *actual* processes in the world whose products are *real*.

### § 4

Reality binds together freedom and necessity, institutions and communities, inside and outside, and diverse, capable beings. Even if contradiction logically connects those poles, there is no need to separate reality into positive and negative realms, such as nature and artificial, human and non-human, the state and communities, etc. Reality is not dual. Instead, reality refers to shared existences at multiple levels of complexity (Hui, 2019, pp. 2-14; Esposito, 2022, pp. 44-51). Strictly

speaking, there are not isolated individuals but multiplicities. That is not a metaphor. Multiplicities are all around: roots, language, powerlines, airline networks, food webs, metabolic and protein assemblages, cities, human communities, fungi, stellar networks, globular clusters, forests, rivers, clouds, neurons, muscles, and countries. The list is infinite. The general ontological principle of multiplicities says that *reality is social*. It is rhizomatic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, pp. 3-26).

To understand that principle, it is necessary to refer to three ideas:

- a) *Reality is composed of multiplicities*: objects, humans, animals, etc. Reality is not limited to things in the ordinary sense of the expression. It encompasses a rich diversity of forces, molecules, planets, organs, fluids, A.I. networks, institutions, electric companies, stones, narratives, movies, sounds, apps, etc. Reality is a tapestry of multiplicities, each defined as a capable being. Everything that can act and change is a living being made of multiplicities. In summary, the concept of multiplicities refers to the composite nature of entities. Each entity, whether a molecule, a human, or a narrative, is not a singular, isolated unit but a complex of interactions and relations that define its existence (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, pp. 3-10; Harman, 2017, pp. 253-262).
- b) *Causation*. Traditionally, as Hempel (1965) assumes, an event causes another event within an exceptionless sequence. In contrast, accepting reality as made by capable entities constituting multiplicities represents a way of insisting on understanding causality as complex from the beginning—meaning that diverse factors and capable beings determine any given event. In that sense, causation refers to the operating interactions at play when something happens. Mechanisms, in other words, depend on the composition and structure of the entities concerned. That means they rely upon their constitutive parts, the powers

of those parts, and the relations between them. We never know what can happen when living beings get together. "Causation, then, arises from the causal powers of entities. Actual events, however, are not caused by single causal powers, but instead are the result of interactions between multiple causal powers" (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 16).

- c) *Retroduction and retrodiction*. Understanding the power of causality is paramount and requires two descriptive procedures. Retrodiction, in contrast to prediction, refers to the explanation or inference of past events based on current knowledge and evidence. While prediction projects future events from the present, retrodiction looks backward, using present information to reconstruct past phenomena. Retroduction, on the other hand, is a reasoning process that seeks to find the most plausible explanation for a given set of facts or phenomena. It goes beyond straightforward deduction and induction. Retroduction involves formulating hypotheses explaining why things are the way they are and exploring new ways of understanding causality and the connection between events. In general, the idea of retrodiction depends on understanding the causal capabilities of entities, which implies that we must grasp how specific entities can cause or influence outcomes. The hypotheses generated through retroduction should plausibly explain past events and accurately correspond to what occurred when applied to real-world cases (Elder-Vass, 2012, pp. 10-19).

Beyond conceptual definitions, it is vital to remember that the rhizome is the image of thought underlying the concepts of retroduction and retrodiction. In that context, understanding reality is the same as describing complex assemblages of capable entities at work in centerless events. The image of the world as being hierarchically ordered is getting old, and it is only attractive to those who want to command others

and sell promises of success, unlimited progress, and unidimensional existences (González & Garavito, 2021).

Differently, a realist ontology highlights a materialistic account of society without having to suppose a central causation coming from a transcendental source and avoiding distinguishing between nature and human communities. Multiplicities form social structures. Using our terms, if we accepted that multiplicities make reality, it is assumed, at the same time, that all that is real is socially composed of complex material parts able to affect themselves and the world in which they exist (Elder-Vass, 2010, pp. 192-204).

## 2. Social structuring perspective

Institutions are one of the most common social structures in a human-level reality. In that concrete scenario, institutions are organizations of capable beings related through their roles within complex mechanisms cooperating in ways that enable them to exert causal powers on the world. Under formalized rules and integrated habits, institutions constitute norm circles, giving form to the living (Elder-Vass, 2012, pp. 15-22).

Institutions comprise habits. The state, family, religion, education, production, language, politics, etc.: we have to deal with norms in institutional scenarios. How so? We develop and internalize behavior patterns shaped by normative environments, becoming institutionalized to the extent that rules are endorsed. That endorsement generates habits: actions that are reproduced without necessarily being based on conscious decisions, but rather are relatively automatic ways of acting. It is the price of living socially: tendencies to follow practices require standardized patterns forming more and less explicit rules crystallized into institutions (Elder-Vass, 2012, pp. 22-28).

Reproduced actions can be aligned by making them converge into patterned actions. We, as humans, are creatures of habit. Traditionally, habits are seen as the product of external pressures (Bourdieu, 1998 & 2023). The complicated question then arises: what exactly is this "pressure"? How does it work? If people endorse common behaviors by accepting and following norms, how can we explain that highly shared tendency?

Let us put this in simpler terms. Let us define institutions as delimited scenarios in which people act. Complex overlapping entities occur there: from facilities to regulations to objects and people;

communities of connected entities affecting themselves irrespective of their consciousness, and explicit acceptance of norms affects quotidian activities. Is that possible by correction, penalization, or castigation? Frankly, it is not enough to say that we risk punishment if our actions do not heed social convention. That is not enough because it oversimplifies the idea that we follow norms solely out of fear of becoming outcasts. Indeed, the problem is more complex.

## § 1

How do we form habits? Institutions constitute “norms circle boundaries” (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 25). That idea suggests that institutions are regulative forms: defined areas of a machinic composition capable of influencing behaviors.

We endorse norms. Proximity and reproduction are significant ingredients—*i.e.*, endorsing (Latour, 2009). There is something more at play, however. In front of others, we adopt certain behaviors. We endorse habits. We are also forced to do it. How? Assemblages of people acting similarly constitute proximal norm circles pressuring action to follow determined performances. We live among circles expressing various radii. We live between family circles. We spend time between working circles: the office, the classroom, the mall, the city, etc. We navigate through urban circles, following rules like using the crosswalk, obeying the stop signal, and taking the correct way on the highway. Bureaucracy is the tightest circle. You have to answer your boss’s call because her boss called her asking about a task that still needs to be added to her inbox. You must be quiet and polite to avoid angering them. Even if she surprises you with a request to do it later in the evening, after you have finished your tasks and are eager to be home. You know you are not alone in that. Your colleagues are doing the same: working, being polite, and telling you that you should be so because there are not many jobs out there, etc. Using a foreign language has less to do with knowing grammar rules than following acts of speech highly enforced. Accents, collocations, idiosyncratic formulas or idioms, sayings, etc. Those are figures of speech expressing habits.

We reproduce behaviors insistently.<sup>2</sup> Practical issues are always constrained by boundaries formed by those around us. Those

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<sup>2</sup> A remarkable case is love. Everyone wants to be original and independent, and give the world the gift of their ingenious creativity and outstanding

boundaries are usually displayed by proximal norms and incarnated by actual behaviors responding to the image of what we believe others want from us. Proximal circles are adopted influences. People tell us what to do by acting in familiar ways. Complementarily, we imagine what they expect from us and respond to that expectation by following their action patterns. In the end, when we follow typical behaviors to respond to what we imagine others' expectations are, we enforce norm conformance (Marai, 2011; Grant, 2016).

Institutions interfere with people exposed to them, and people constitute their normative environment by mutual affection. In other words, individuals organized into particular groups form institutionalized environments of affection created by highly mechanized interactions. In such an understanding, a mechanical process occurs: dispositions to conform to norms are produced by interactions of repetitive behaviors. Normativity occurs in group dynamics by expressing the causal powers of influencing actions. That shows more than a personal commitment. "Members of a norm circle are aware that other members of the circle share their commitment; they feel an obligation to them to endorse and enforce the norm concerned, and they expect others that they will support them in that endorsement and enforcement" (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 26). Reproducing habit refers to an attachment to entities bigger than oneself. That is the source of feelings of belonging. The pack is outstanding and covers us warmly. In there, we are tranquil beings. However, we are also domesticated (Canetti, 1973, pp. 93-121).

However, we do not act in the name of others. It is not enough to say we are obedient beings. We act as others do because they have a massive influence on us. We mechanically respond to others by doing what we consider expected of us. Therefore, we express something more significant than our idiosyncratic personal attachment to external views: the collective endorsement of norms and the repetitive reaction to follow what others do. Sometimes, rules are explicit. Other times, rules are implicit. Appropriateness. Living among others comes with a price: the more you belong to a collective, the more you will enforce habits on yourself.

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personality before dying. However, people also desire the experience of love—the experience of sharing existence. It is paradoxical: how can people love if doing so goes beyond the limits of personality? By loving others as a mirror of themselves (Illouz, 2013).

## § 2

Explaining collective endorsement is a complicated task. Normative mechanisms interact diversely with each other to address sociological and historical concerns. There are neither static structures nor unidimensionally enforced behaviors. Humans institutionalize normative circles in their ways of doing things in a similar manner. How is that? There are no generic or definite answers. It is necessary to describe groups in their immanent becoming institutions. Just after doing that, conclusions can come.

## § 3

The general principle of that perspective is that interactions among individuals who express themselves as capable beings through their actions are limited to endorsed norms and enforced activities. How can we explain that institutions secure conformance to rules? Institutions are real because patterned behaviors from which behavioral models arise materialize them. Highly reproduced actions within cooperative arrangements create conformance.

That idea suggests something essential here: institutions are real and socially constructed. Rights, duties, responsibilities, and obligations: rules are everywhere. Those rules represent possibilities. They also display restrictions. In any case, the interference produced by individuals who consistently interact limits actions. How can we understand that?

Collectively engaged norms are the expression of intentionally adopted beliefs and desires. Deliberately oriented actions are not reduced to consciously made decisions to believe and desire things. Purposely oriented activities refer to coordinated behaviors arising in recognition of repetitive behaviors. We are oriented towards others so that we can follow their actions in orchestrated adjustments. That means we act on behalf of a wider group. Mechanical operations occur within individual actions responding to assemblages of others acting in regulated ways. "We think that 'we intend,' 'we believe,' or 'we desire' without thinking of these as our own individual intentions, beliefs, or desires" (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 58). Is obedience what explains that? Not necessarily. Conformity is produced by following other people's actions. We act similarly to the environment in which we live. The effectiveness

of our conformance emerges from a recognition of patterns. Societies are processing machines that express causal effectiveness (Elder-Vass, 2012, pp. 65-69).

It is essential to note that societies incorporate behaviors into their mechanisms. The living force sustaining institutions are our capabilities becoming regulated in the middle of standardized functions and collectively engaging norms. What people collectively do is the most critical issue involved in the constitution of norm circles: it is what produces institutions and what can change them.

The distinction between regulative and constitutive rules helps develop this consideration. Regulative rules enable administrative activities. Those activities represent imperatives that determine actions. Imperatives are expressed as expectations: one should work, study, save money, love others, travel, learn new languages, and be flexible (Illouz, 2008). Regulative rules work as patterned schemes, prioritizing activities and bestowing them with horizons and goals. In one sentence: regulative rules are sequences of steps designed for programming an answer to specific action scenarios. On the other hand, constitutive rules create action possibilities. Constitutive rules do not directly codify actions. Instead, they create limited spaces to allow actions brought about by their inner causality. Those spaces resemble scenarios to act under complex interests of exploring diverse possibilities and reaching multiple outcomes. For instance, imagination is made by constitutive rules in that the aesthetic imperative is to create its own productivity set of regulations (Sloterdijk, 2017).

#### § 4

Habits seem to be illusions. They are produced. Habits work, in any case. The distinction between regulative and constitutive rules is significant because it indicates we actively try to manage reality, creating institutionalized behaviors, *i.e.*, highly reproduced actions (Mowles, 2015; Tarde, 1969).

There are events and human responses to them: brute facts and institutionalized facts. We all deal with entities, properties, happenings, and forces existing independently of human desires, purposes, and plans. Institutional facts are related to human initiatives to regulate brute facts by creating highly regulated action scenarios. We face various obligations, authorizations, requirements, and duties. Institutions expressing regulations are not necessarily concerned with restricting

people. Rights, permissions, empowerments, etc. are constitutive rules that enable parameters to create plans, programs, alternatives, etc. In this manner, institutions materialize entangled actions, providing means to manage reality and changing circumstances. In a different vocabulary, a society governed by norms aims to ensure people can manage reality through the social contract expressed by endorsed habits. A society shaped by institutions intends to transform its existence through a practical system to meet collective reality requirements (Esposito, 2022, pp. 45-50).

Generally, we assign functions to things, engage rules, regulate actions, and let them flourish into delimited institutions in the double sense of securing environments for living as openly as possible and creatively deploying exploring reality assemblages capable of constructing supervised and controlled milieus. Living is ambiguous. There are limits, but we can move into them. We have evolved dispositions to follow rules, whether or not they explicitly tell us how to act. That idea refers to a puzzle. How does socialization produce people who can conform to regulations and feel free simultaneously?

To answer that question, it is necessary to consider the performative power of language and the sociohistorical deployment of formalized practices producing subjectivity—*i.e.*, historical formations of institutionalized strategies and regulative articulations between language and knowledge (Deleuze, 1986). From Michel Foucault's works on knowledge and power to Robert Merton's functionalist theory, the debate about the constitution of normative environments and conformance has led to considering groups' capabilities to influence people (Cusset, 2008; De Landa, 2000). This complex theoretical panorama has been the place for interrogating enabling regulative scenarios and the role of people's capabilities in becoming institutionalized interactive assemblages able to affect reality.

In summary, the main lesson of this analysis is as follows: understanding how institutions are formed through collective action requires concrete sociohistorical descriptions that reveal interactive mechanisms. For our purposes, institutions can be understood as performing regulations and interfering with people's actions while also serving as open spaces that grant people the ability to produce creative responses to reality. People's powers lie in the complex interactions among diverse, capable beings who strive to consolidate institutions expressing ontological measures against uncertainty.

## § 5

Why is that relevant to us? In the 1960s and 1970s, we witnessed an oppositional comprehension of institutions and mobilization. In Latin America, two unreconcilable poles emerged from that view. On the one hand, tradition understood the institutions as grounded in hierarchical communities performing coercion and restriction following conservative disciplinary ethical frames. On the other hand, anti-institutional movements have been seen as changing powers that can produce desirable transformations. The idea that social movements push institutions is traditional in Latin America. As a result, we have been driving multi-level disconnections between the state and society—to use a longstanding vocabulary among us (Tilly, 1978; Tormey & Townshend, 2006; Paschel, 2016).

Thinking about institutions in terms of assemblages, capable beings, norm circles, and dynamic interactions represents a compelling alternative. The social construction of institutions is an idea that changes everything. It lets us consider institutions as more than a mirror image of insatiable discontent and ideological differentiation in the middle of highly polarized societies made of individuals forced to act and believe in specific ways. Indeed, institutions are ill-considered if we restrict our comprehension to the idea that they express regulative attempts to control people—an institutional objective that has to be contested by social and political struggles. In contrast, describing institutions as complex assemblages of capable beings interacting and affecting themselves in what they can do crystallizes a conceptual image useful for abandoning a unidimensional comprehension of how institutions respond to social demands.

Institutions do not necessarily have to do with disciplinary techniques or control devices. People do not have to contest institutions that are restoring old-fashioned values. Affections: if there is a power in collective actions, it is because individuals interfere with themselves, creating normative compliance within changing institutional environments (Elder-Vass, 2012, pp. 60-69). Institutions do more than negatively constrain habits or repress people. They can materialize collectively endorsed rules, allowing exploration and discovery of action possibilities. Enablement: institutions are norm circles able to constitute action scenarios that are highly regulated but also productive.

## § 6

The outside versus institutions: non-actual but real possibilities of acting constantly resist formalization and integration as functions of regulated behaviors. Those possibilities always represent fresh air, letting us think there are options. Of course, it is unnecessary to suppose a transcendental stock of ideal possibilities of action to believe that. Instead, the dynamic movement of interactions shifts from standardized behaviors to randomly engaged alternatives, as adaptive relations among capable beings produce action possibilities.

We never know what happens at the level of quotidian interactions running silently within institutionalized habits. We are not constantly aware of how people evade administrators, procurators, heirs, priests, authoritarians, nationalists, professors, commanders, functionaries, presidential candidates, ideological leadership, etc. Dynamically and strategically performed struggles and resistance do not have to be taken as organized mobilizations subsumed into political ideologies and social motifs. Institutions are molar forms that operate as behavioral organizing mechanisms arising from shared habits. That is the reason for their anthems, icons, symbols, choreography, etc. (Canetti, 1973, pp. 73-121). Alternatively, it is essential to consider the institution's becoming from the viewpoint of its social constitution and the efforts to transform the processes that produce it *from within*. *Where can it be found resisting forces?* Against a conservative consideration about how institutions depend on a superior organizational will, we can say that institutions are promoted and challenged by collective mobilization and organization of people pushing the normative boundaries they ethically and politically subscribe to (Esposito, 2022, pp. 24-26).

It is necessary to qualify this view. The notion of the social construction of norm circles suggests that institutional limits are formed by dynamic multiplicities constantly interacting with themselves. Institutions are not definite forms. Normative leadership does not command them. Institutions exceed political, spiritual, or ideological personages. Collective actions structuring habits generate institutions. Even more, the same interactive processes equally change institutions. There is no need to reduce praxis to the state's role of administering lives. Since the 1980s, discontent and struggles against hierarchical organizations and authoritarian personages supposedly defining, guiding, and transfor-

ming history challenged that view. That is the concept of a traditional political conception of the underlying ideological forces producing order and command: the state and law as the expression of the leader's will (Esposito, 2022, pp. 26-30 & 56-59).

Let us assume, then, that the social structuring process perspective opens a new understanding under which institutions are emergent properties of collective assemblages, becoming differentiated by experimenting with formalization and integration at the level of action possibilities. This becoming is represented by creative, collaborative endeavors to produce alternative habits concerning the actual ones beyond any idiosyncratic world vision. Institutions live. They are creatures. They are powerful entities. However, they live because of the intense performance of capable beings making a home in their time of existence. Institutions are not abstract beings. The social construction of institutions materializes a real imagination: a social faculty independent of voluntaristic comprehension around individuals sharing ideological representations and personal motifs and joining groups pretending to command and change the world.

## Conclusions

The presented discussion delves relates to the early 21st century in Latin America, a period marked by significant controversies around change. It addresses the emergence of new social movements, which have played a crucial role in challenging institutional frameworks, demanding rights, and fostering new forms of governance. Their emergence is of paramount importance in understanding the dynamics of societal change.

In that context, we can summarize our thesis statement as follows. The living world is not ontologically made up of substantial entities but constituted by processes. Reality is organized as interdependent multiplicities undergoing differentiation processes, partially stabilized and actively maintained at different timescales and spaces. Even entities that intuitively appear to be paradigms of things, such as organisms, institutions, and persons, are better understood as multiplicities in becoming different. According to an anti-institutional political view based on that thesis, we must free ourselves and incorporate the constitutive fluidity of reality into our existing ways. Control abandonment, uncertainty management, and nomadism: we should not expect to rule

reality but navigate unpredictability (Scoones & Stirling, 2020; Nicholson & Dupré, 2018; Braidotti, 2002 & 2006; Helmke & Levitsky, 2006).

On the other hand, a conservative reaction to that idea is the notion that without commands, penalties, boundaries, and restrictions, human societies would implode under disorder and barbarism. Movements and change can occur, but only within certain limits if we want to maintain security (Williams, 2022; Friberg, 2015; Ramalingam, 2015). This delicate balance between control and change underscores the complexity of the issue.

In the middle of both of those ideas, a particularly compelling problem stands. Institutions are not necessarily static apparatuses compressing instincts and tendencies in the name of civilized communitarian values (Deleuze, 2004, pp. 19-22). The same applies to the traditional idea that social movements express hierarchically organized forces of change (Paschel, 2016, pp. 220-238). Indeed, that view has proven divisive and has inhibited an alternative comprehension of the social construction of institutions. Institutions and social movements impact reality from that standpoint because they can manage uncertain circumstances through centralized organizations, depending on leadership and ideological conviction.

How can we think about institutions and social movements without adopting the ideological and political leadership approach and identifying with opinions and beliefs through group thinking? The social ontology perspective represents an option based on a very particular theoretical assertion: We are not detached entities making the world livable by the effect of our convictions, subjective perceptions, and passions. We are collectively made entities acting inter-connectedly in the middle of an uncontrollable world.

## § 1

Becoming different means bringing it into existence through non-actual action. The power of acting involves social interactions framing us. Actions bring habits into being, giving them shape and form (Esposito, 2022, p. 52). It is for that reason that institutions are capable of producing environments in which one can act creatively. That is a different image of institutions as being made of organizational structures, elite allies, favorable public opinion, and the ideological ability to mobilize individuals. Institutions are not mere containers of individual behaviors congregated by ideological motives. Ultimately, institutions are constituted by *shared behaviors dynamically*

*configuring norms*. Actions become normative because they produce collectively shared reproduction mechanisms. Those are habits: actions performed among other actions and repetitively endorsed. In such a way, actions configure practices. Practices configure mutual affection. Habits represent the price of living among people: everyone who wants to enter into the existential dominion of others must endorse commonly engaged practices. It is the normative condition of living within norm circles.

That idea represents a complex view of how habits configure regulations that, at the same time, produce collectively shared action scenarios. It is the recursivity of normative systems that creates habits and promotes norm circles. It is essential to consider the notional novelty at play. Institutions are norm circles. That means they are mechanisms emerging from endorsing and reproducing limited forms and patterned actions. That is a radical, materialistic account. People act, reproducing more and less unchallenged activities. That is the price of participating in social networks. People's actions create a sense in others that they should endorse them by reproducing sanctioned behaviors.

The proposed theory highlights that formal and informal institutions play a critical role in shaping the development and social movements of Latin America. Its practical implications include the need for adaptive governance that responds to local realities and promotes inclusive policies that reduce inequality and corruption. It implies that sustainable development requires collaboration between governments, civil society, and economic actors. Policymakers should focus on strengthening institutional frameworks while remaining open to change through social movements. Furthermore, the theory emphasizes that understanding regional differences is essential for designing effective interventions that balance external influences with domestic needs, fostering long-term social and economic progress.

## § 2

How we act alters the world. That possibility does not depend on individuals; collective assemblages underpin it. That is our central point. Moreover, it is an exciting point for three reasons.

Firstly, it allows us to consider a realistic approach to social construction processes and affirm that the actions of those building it inherently regulate its structuring. Indeed, the social is real because it is the product of interactions emerging as habits.

An additional advantage of this view is its connection to understanding how social change can occur. If it is true that institutions are the product of interactions, changing them is not the same as changing minds or convincing political representatives of political power to change. Norms circles are products. They are not ideational systems of beliefs existing in the archive of influential people desiring domination and domesticating people. Changing institutions is about changing habits.

Thirdly, it is necessary to describe how interactions produce norm circles. Institutions and communities are understandable from the viewpoint of describing interactions. Once those interactions are described, alternative articulations of agency that can generate behavioral changes within institutional environments can be considered. That is the methodological translation of the idea that socially constructed institutions influencing behaviors can be changed by transformed ways of acting. Ultimately, the capability of doing things within complex surroundings meddles between action and structure.

### § 3

Adopting a philosophical vocabulary, we can close our considerations by stressing the underlying ideas of action and power as actual capabilities to intervene in the world.

Living beings are what they do. On the other hand, our actions are influenced by the world and others' actions: we live in the middle of other capable beings (Deleuze, 2006a, 2002 & 1988).

What is power? Power is not an attribute, a property, or something reachable by desiring or violently capturing it. It is not about how you look at others or how others look at you. Violence and conflicts are secondary expressions of intensely diminishing capabilities. Power is not the same as violence: it is not about conflicts. Power is about what living beings can do. It entails their capabilities, relations, connections, augmentation, diminution, and cooperative redundancies. So, power is about agency. Its constituent elements are intensity and duration.

Power is not essentially repressive (since "it incites," "it induces," "it seduces"). It is practiced before it is possessed (since it is possessed only in a determinable form, that of class, and a determined form, that of the State). It passes through the hands of the mastered no

less than through the hands of the masters (since it passes through every related force) (Deleuze, 2006a, p. 71).

In that context, one does not ask how to get power. Power refers to the capacity to accomplish tasks. One has to ask differently, then. How is power exercised? In other words, to what extent is an action realized? How far can one go with something? In what sense is it possible to act? In what ways can actions influence, change, and provoke other activities? For how long is that true? Under what conditions is it possible to do something? Under what conditions is it possible to refrain from acting?

Habits are distributed realizations arising from transmitted actions. Formalization and integration are functions. Formalization refers to rules becoming standardized by reproduction and repetition. Integration refers to the ways those rules become imperatives. This means regular distribution and transmission regulate the variable possibilities of doing things.

We live in that reality every day. Speaking habits. Writing habits. Desiring habits. Working habits. Reading habits. Buying habits. Using time habits. Loving habits. Sexual habits. Deciding patterns and evaluative habits. Standards are everywhere. But that is not the problem. What is complicated and exciting to understand is that there is a mutual presupposition between individual actions and massively shared behaviors acting as normative patterns to obey at the expense of not succeeding in our endeavors or becoming outcasts (Foucault, 1996 & 2024).

To affect or to be affected: when one considers reality as made of capable beings constantly related to each other along more and less limited normative scenarios, everything about describing and comprehending implies an acceptance of the relational nature of power. That is a powerful idea.

It is characteristic of a relational ontology to recognize that multiplicities interacting with multiplicities express their nature through their actions, thereby creating reality. Any action affects existing actions, changing their direction, purposes, intensity, and extension. How can we capture the relational nature of reality? By interrogating the performative capacity of multiplicities interacting with themselves: to incite, induce, seduce, make it easy, make it difficult, enlarge, limit, make it more probable, make it less possible, enclose, control,

arrange, promote, let things go or restrain them, kill, enclose, support, imagine, love—this list illustrates the idea that performed capabilities are expressions of power. By defining power more broadly, we move beyond how movements ideologically framed their demands. What do you do? What can be done? How much time will it take to do something? Are there nurturing conditions to do something? Is it not possible to do something because there are no conditions? As we already said, you do not ask how to get power. You ask: what is the relational scenario at play for doing something?

#### § 4

What does it mean to struggle in the already described panorama? Institutions are both diagrammatic spaces and places of transformation. Habits are everywhere. Although suddenly, things are no longer performed in the same way. Institutions are unstable. Adopting an ontology of social construction provokes renovated thoughts about the meaning of struggling, resisting, and mobilizing. Changing is not about working in the name of “more adequate institutional values.” It is about making behavioral adjustments in response to varied circumstances.

That idea can change everything within the common notion of struggling. Mutating involves the composing processes in the social construction of behavioral standards. You should not change the system. The question does not concern the existence of abstract imperatives. What matters is the processes that make up patterned actions. Creating instead of struggling: how do we act differently? Other actions can exist. So, you should challenge the intrinsic mechanisms of the social construction processes in the name of non-actual but possible ways of doing things. Becoming differently involves an instituent praxis. More resistance comes from the possibilities of doing things than from contested ideologies in the name of additional ideological assumptions. Let us finish by briefly elaborating on that.

From the beginning, avoiding any assumption about power centralization and its ideological realization is essential. We should avoid thinking about the head of the institution or the *Institutor of things* (Esposito, 2022, pp. 16-25). There is no need to suppose a central function of privileged groups holding power by nature or material constitution. It is an old trick to erase from memory any reference to impersonal mechanisms into which actions become highly regulated (Esposito, 2022, pp. 25-35). True, privileged people can make decisions in their

closed-door scenarios. However, everything those people can do in their offices requires networked multiplicities and enabling conditions to reach felicitous realization. Routines and inflections materialize power: twists and turns in habits changing at the rhythm of activities pressured by actual events.

So, one does not necessarily have to fight the State. One must not necessarily struggle against commanders, elites, white people, rich people, the police, etc. One does not necessarily contest the Father, God, Sex, or Law as dominant figures. Instead, one must challenge how we collectively endorse those figures—one acts differently. One calls for collective endeavors to transform norm circles by engaging in activities that focus on operating mechanisms and patterned behaviors. One evades stable forms: one has become other. One challenges identities, boundaries, limits, essences, and anything reproducing them. The instability of articulated activities defines a panorama of struggles aimed at altering highly reproduced actions.

This is extremely curious because it entails complexity: behavioral integration (habits) constituting formalization (rules) are products of mechanisms operating as limited forms of normative scenarios that simultaneously create possibilities of behavioral differentiation. How so? Dynamic interactions, partially stabilized, enable integration and formalization. If that notion is accepted, you must fight formalization and integration—not political representatives or ideological characters and their motifs.

Living together is subject to unstable differentiation. For that reason, we mobilize and struggle together all the time. So, those are activities expressing sustained performances based on networks contesting reality that should be described beyond categories of the state institutions—*e.g.*, legislation, public policies, bureaucracy, and political representation. By engaging the social structuring perspective, it is possible to consider norms and habits as irreducible to the private interests that individuals defend. Instead, we see norms and habits as rooted in communitarian processes. The same idea concerns change. Becoming different is not the same as claiming state power. It is not the same as talking as the long-awaited representative of the People. Militants can be as authoritarian as their conservative counterparts, indeed. To change is to mobilize at the level of interactions and struggle to create non-actual habits. One resists when one acts differently. In that way, actions remain transitive, unstable, and unruly. That is an open door because one can always

ask: how can we live differently? How can we love alternatively? How can we write boundaryless? How can we buy unconventionally? How can we consume alternatively? How can we work freely? How can we think without restriction? How can we desire formlessly? How can we build open identities? Those questions remain open to collective experimentation.

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