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The Phenomenon of Social Institution and Its Theoretical Definition



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Abstract. Theoretical description of institutions as social phenomena requires that their adequate model be constructed. However, the concept of “social institution” has no universally accepted definition. The article discusses the phenomenon of social institution and analyzes its definitions. Researchers consider social institution from several points of view, but the existing definitions do not reflect all the features of social institutions. It has been recently acknowledged that institutions need to be developed slowly, and radical changes in social institutions often cause serious deterioration in their functioning. The theoretical model of social institution should explain the reasons for this stability. A good model should also explain other properties of social institutions, for example, their system and structural features. The paper proposes the model of institution as an open social system with blurred boundaries and an uncertain number of participants. At the macro level, institutions as social systems have a normative, ideal and organizational structure. The elements and the bearers of properties of such a system at the micro level are represented by people with their worldview, ideas, values, behavior standards and thought patterns, their specific recurring social actions and mutual expectations. Such a model explains the persistence of institutions: an abrupt change in the rules and regulations cannot result in equally rapid change in worldview, ideas, values, behavior standards, cognitive patterns, and mutual expectations of social actors. Instead, a radical change in the “rules of the game” causes great stress that affects the actor’s personal qualities. The model opens up new opportunities for forecasting the results of social institutions reforms. The reforms will be successful when it does not require too great a change in behavior standards, thinking patterns, values and ideas of the majority of the subjects that make up the system. Otherwise, it will lead to a deterioration in

the functioning of institutions. The author of the article gives her own definition of social institution on the basis of the proposed theoretical model.

Key words: social institution, definition of institution, social system, system approach, social actor, structure of the social system.

The concept of *institution*, although widely used in the social sciences, does not have a universally accepted definition so far. Meanwhile, the theoretical description of institutions as social phenomena requires creating their adequate working model. Therefore, in the process of theoretical description of social reality, sociologists and other social scientists try to put forward a working definition of social institution.

Sociology took the concept of *institution* from jurisprudence where it meant a set of rules governing legal relations [see: Glotov M.B., 2003: 14]. At the turn of the 20th century, this concept entered the vocabulary of sociologists. E. Durkheim defined sociology as “the science of social institutions, their genesis and function” [Durkheim, 1991: 20]. During that period, economists (the first of them was T. Veblen), and then anthropologists, political scientists, etc. began to study institutions.

Even before the emergence of the term *institution*, A. Comte and H. Spencer – the founders of sociology – considered society through the prism of the forms of social organization that were subsequently named institutions. According to A. Comte, society is a system that comprises social institutions such as the state, Church, family, and cooperation. Spencer’s organicist theory compared social institutions to organs of the human body.

Afterwards, the term *social institution* in scientific literature had many different

definitions. In English there is a difference between *institute* and *institution*: the former is more related to social norms and principles, the latter – to social organizations and establishments [see: Bychenkov V.M., 1996: 7]. There is no such distinction in Russian. We shall consider the definitions given by sociologists and economists, because their contents have certain points in common [see, for example: Kirdina S.G., 2001: 137-138]. One of the first definitions of social institution was given by economist and sociologist T. Veblen: “...they [institutions] are of the nature of an habitual method of responding to the stimuli which these changing circumstances afford. The institutions are, in substance, prevalent habits of thought with respect to particular relations and particular functions of the individual and of the community” [Veblen T., 1984: 200-201].

Modern researchers give different definitions of institutions. In some of them, institution is viewed primarily as a system of norms and rules. According to the definition given by economist D. North, institutions are “the rules of the game” in a society that in a certain way organize the interaction between people [see: North D., 1997: 6]. D. Jary and J. Jary give the following definition, which is close to the previous one: “Institute is an established order comprising rule-bound and standardized behavior” [Jary D., Jary J., 2001]. According to the Dictionary of

Modern Western Sociology, the structural functionalism views social institution as “a stable set of formal and informal rules, principles, norms and settings that regulate various spheres of human activity and organize them into a system of roles and statuses that form a social system” [Sedov L.A., 1990: 117]. According to these definitions, institutions are “the rules of the game”, and the individuals and organizations that embody the accepted norms and rules into action are “the players”.

Another sociological tradition tends to consider institutions from a system-wide viewpoint. According to some sociologists, institutions comprise not only the regulatory aspect, but also the social actions of society members. Such an understanding of the term *institution* is given by the following researchers. According to A. Giddens, “Social institutions are the main types of social activities performed by the majority of members of a given society. Institutions include the norms and values that the majority observe; all the institutionalized ways of behavior are protected and supported by tough sanctions. Social institutions form the bedrock of a society, because they represent relatively fixed and stable ways of behavior” [Giddens A., 1999: 673]. According to N. Abercrombie, S. Hill, B.C. Turner, “The term *institution* is widely used to describe social practices that are regularly and continuously repeated, are sanctioned and maintained by social norms, and have a major significance in the social structure. Like the concept of *role*, the concept of *institution* refers to established patterns of behavior; however, *institution*

is considered as a unit of a higher order, a more general one that involves many roles” [Abercrombie N., Hill S., Turner B.C., 2008].

The definitions by Giddens and Abercrombie convey an important idea of a regular long-term repeatability, the *stability* of norms, rules, and behavior standards. A. Giddens gives another definition that emphasizes this very aspect: “Social institutions are the most temporally long-established and spatially widespread practices” [Giddens A., 2005: 60]. However, the stability of institutions consists not only in their regular and long-term repeatability, but also in their independence from the actions of an individual “average” actor. Institutions are also sustainable in the sense that they can be changed only through the effort of large groups of actors who use special mechanisms for this purpose [see: Kleiner G.B., 2004: 17-18].

According to the definition of *institution* given in a textbook under the editorship of G.V. Osipov and L.N. Moskvichev, it includes not only social actions performed by individuals, but also the individuals who implement these actions: “Social institution is a set of individuals, organizations, institutions, equipment and facilities, which satisfies public demands through the functioning of the system of mutually agreed and appropriately focused standards of behavior” [Osipov G.V., Moskvichev L.N., 2003: 876]. This definition uses *the functional approach* to institutions, which ensure that any social need is satisfied. In this case the functional approach is useful because it highlights the role of institutions in society.

Due to the fact that *institutions* are often regarded as a system of rules and standardized patterns of behavior, this definition is applied to a large (including indefinitely large), and to a small number of institutions' participants. In this case we can talk about macro-institutions (that spread their action on the society as a whole), meso-institutions (that act only in certain regions, industries, etc.), micro-institutions (relating to the activities of individual companies and organizations) and even nano-institutions (that determine the actions of individuals) [see: Kleiner G.B., 2004: 24]. On the other hand, there exists a viewpoint that institutions can include only "super-collective" social formations with an indefinite composition of members [see: Bychenkov V.M., 1996], since a purpose of institutions is to meet the needs of the society as a whole. In this case, only macro- and meso-institutions can actually be called institutions. The standards of activity of individual enterprises and organizations are routines [see: Nelson R., Winter S., 2000: 120], and the actions of individuals are determined by their individual psychology and behavior stereotypes.

Institutions can be grouped on the basis of other characteristics as well. For example, formal and informal institutions are distinguished according to the degree of their formalization in legislative framework. S.G. Kirdina shows that this division is also relevant to what should be considered institutions and whether institutions should

include rules and standardized patterns of behavior of individuals and individual organizations. S.G. Kirdina opines that institutions are "inseparable unities of formal and informal rules. It is those rules that, on the one hand, became an integral part of social practice and, on the other hand, were codified into law – upon the tables, in the Code of Laws of the Russian Empire or in electronic form in the current U.S. legal practice – should be regarded as institution, i.e. an element of load-bearing social structure. Society as an integral organism cannot function as an integral organism without institutions [Kirdina S.G., 2001: 137].

S.G. Kirdina also criticizes D. North's approach to institutions as factors that are external in relation to economy; she proposes to consider economy as an institutional complex, and institutions – as a "skeleton" of economy: "When institutions are viewed as a "skeleton" of economy rather than as economic development factors, it helps focus on the identification of "bearing structures" of the modern Russian economy instead of those elements which it constantly rejects" [Kirdina S.G., 2001: 138]. This is consistent with the opinion of other researchers involved in the study of social institutions. They recognize that institutions are "not so much built or designed, as grown" [Kleiner G.B., 2004: 7]. But if institutions are only a set of formal and informal norms and rules, it is not clear why they are difficult to change, "build and design".

S.G. Kirdina herself defines institutions as “deep, historically established and constantly reproducing social relationships that ensure the integration of different types of societies” [Kirdina S.G., 2014: 56].

However, if institutions are viewed as relatively stable social relations or social practices, it does not explain the reasons for their stability. On the other hand, institutions are subject to changes, for example, those introduced by the legislation. Reflecting on the stability and variability of reproduction of institutions, P. Berger and T. Luckmann define institution as a “mutual typification of habitualized actions for figures of various kinds” [Berger P., Luckmann T., 1995: 93]. This definition shows institutions as typical social actions, social expectations, social relations. Berger and Luckmann stress the gradual creation of “mutual typifications” in the course of history: “Institutions always have a history, of which they are the products” [Berger P., luckmann T., 1995: 93]. According to this definition, institutions can include routines and individual habits, even if they are “mutually-typified”. This definition sheds light on the institutionalization of social practices, and creation of institutions; however, it says little about institutions as objective entities and their role in society. Structural properties of social institutions cannot be described if relied only upon actors [see: Giddens A., 2005: 250-251].

N. Luhmann also expresses his ideas in terms of social expectations and social relations. According to his definition,

institution is “a set of actual expectations of relationships, which are actualized in the context of social roles and, as such, can count on social consensus” [Luhman N., 1965: 12]. This definition continues the traditions of the school of structural functionalism that exaggerates the importance of social consensus, which was repeatedly criticized by representatives of other sociological schools.

If we regard institutions as social phenomena, we can see that they have systemic properties, such as a structure, hierarchy and relationships between the elements of a system, and the presence of direct and feedback links typical of any system.

An understanding of social institutions that is close to the above ideas is given by Jonathan Turner in his definition: institution is “a complex of positions, roles, norms and values lodged in particular types of social structures and organizing relatively stable patterns of human activity with respect to fundamental problems in producing life-sustaining resources, in reproducing individuals, and in sustaining viable societal structures within a given environment” [J. Turner, 1997: 6].

Rum Harre’s definition is also productive: “An institution was defined as an interlocking double-structure of persons-as-role-holders or office-bearers and the like, and of social practices involving both expressive and practical aims and outcomes” [Harre R., 1979: 98].

Such definitions represent institutions rather as a kind of *social system* that implements

any social function. This is just what is implied in sociological literature when it discusses social institutions. When speaking about social institutions, sociologists distinguish political, economic, religious institutions, institutions of education and science, communication, family, law, etc. [see for example: Giddens A., 1999: 362-482], which represent not only the “rules of the game” and a set of norms, but also *a set of participants* in those institutions *implementing* the accepted system of norms and rules.

Social system is defined as “a structural element of social reality, a holistic formation, the basic elements of which are people, their relationships and interaction; it is viewed as an organized set of people and relations between them expressed in social structures and processes” [Lokosov V.V., 1999: 407-408]. The elements of a social system are people whose behavior depends on their personal characteristics, qualities and motivations as well as on social values and norms, and also on the position that these people occupy in the system, and the functions they perform [see: Osipov G.V., 2010: 110]. At the same time, social systems are open: their boundaries are rather blurred, and one cannot distinguish clearly the whole set of the elements of the system [see: Giddens A., 2005: 242].

Giddens puts forward an important idea that although the boundaries of society are quite blurred and the existence of society does not depend on the activity of any of its members, it is obvious that society would cease to exist

if all its actors disappear [see: Giddens A., 2005: 68]. In fact, the same can be said about social institutions: their boundaries are considerably blurred, their existence does not depend upon the activity of any single actor, but they are formed and maintained by the set of actors included in them.

It should be noted that, when considering social systems, one should not fall into objectivism that leads to the criticized misconceptions of the structural-functional approach such as organicism, too much statics, the underestimation of the role of social conflicts, strict isolation from the environment, etc. Social system should be considered both on the macro- and micro-levels.

At the macro-level, institutions as social systems have a normative structure (that includes norms and social roles), an ideal structure (beliefs, convictions, values, etc.) and an organizational structure (that defines the ways of relating the statuses and the nature of reproduction systems) [see: Osipov G.V., 2010: 111].

The structure of social systems is characterized by social positions and roles of individuals, and a set of norms and values inherent in social systems: “A specific way of interaction between the elements, i.e. individuals who occupy certain social positions (status) and perform certain social functions (role) in accordance with the set of norms and values adopted in a given social system, forms the structure of this social system” [Osipov G.V., 2010: 111]. Here it should be noted that the

question concerning the set of values in a social system is complicated, because values can be different among the members of the system, they can be imposed by powerful groups, and one can speak only about the values *prevailing* at the moment. Thus, all the three kinds of structures of the system can be changed from outside the system (e.g. by legislative means: through the adoption of new standards and organizational structures). The change in the “rules of the game” affects institutions as systems and causes response processes as an attempt to adapt to these rules.

At the micro-level, the elements of such a system are represented by *people* with their *worldview, ideas, values, standards of behavior* and *thinking patterns*, with their specific *recurring social actions* and *mutual expectations*. The system itself is, of course, represents something more than just the sum of its members. However, the actors that constitute a system are the *carriers of its properties*. Sustainable social practices, social relations and routine actions are the actions that are continuously reproduced by people. However, people’s behavior even in familiar situations is determined by their interpretation of these situations [see: Giddens A., 2005: 144-152]. This interpretation depends on the meanings that people give to these institutions, as well as their statuses and roles in them.

Thus, it becomes clear why institutions cannot be drastically changed without consequences (often negative) for society,

and why they need to be “grown” slowly. Abrupt changes in rules and regulations that restrict the behavior of agents cannot lead to the same rapid changes in ideas, values, behavior standards, cognitive patterns, and mutual expectations, which do not change immediately even in critical situations. A critical change in the “rules of the game” arouses a feeling of “radical ontological insecurity” in people, which leads to severe stress and affects personal qualities. And resocialization comes only after a while [see: Giddens A., 2005: 114-116].

The change in the “rules of the game” is accepted quickly when it does not require too great a change in behavior standards, meaning structures, values and thought patterns of the majority of the subjects that form the system. If such a change runs contrary to the values, ideas, behavior standards and thinking patterns of actors, it leads to unpredictable changes in the functioning of institutions. In particular, therefore, not only did the radical change in “the rules of the game” in Russia in the 1990s lead to the sharp deterioration in the functioning of all institutions, but it also was a severe cultural trauma for people, and its consequences still linger. Moreover, continuous change in “the rules of the game” and constant reforms of institutions causes damage to the functioning of institutions and to their participants. Currently, economists who advocate the institutional approach recommend to be very careful when reforming institutions: “A really good reform is the one that was supposed to start a long time ago and that

which cannot be disputed by anyone when it is beginning to be implemented” [see: Boyer R. et al., 2008: 23-24].

Having analyzed the concepts and taking into account all the clarifications made in relation to social systems and social structures, we shall now give our definition of social institution: *social institution is an open social system, in which a social actor is the element and bearer of its properties, which aims to satisfy certain social needs, includes a set of formal and*

informal norms, values, statuses and roles that are expressed in specific normative, ideal and organizational social structures and relatively stable social practices.

This theoretical model of social institutions not only helps understand the nature of social institutions, explains the reasons for deterioration of their functioning in the conditions of rapid and radical change, but it also provides new opportunities for forecasting the results of reforms of institutions.

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