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Cognition, Institutions, and Social Change: A Conversation with Chrysostomos Mantzavinos

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In 2004, the winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize in economics, Douglass North, along with C. Mantzavinos and S. Shariq, published a ground-breaking article in *Perspectives on Politics*: “Learning, Institutions, and Economic Performance.” In the article, the authors coined the term *cognitive institutionalism* to refer to a dynamic socio-analytic framework that relies on learning processes as the main source of the emergence, persistence and change of institutional arrangements (cultural norms and legal rules). For the authors, institutions frame and guide the mental models, decisions and behaviors of social actors over time. What is more, the cognitive foundations of these processes may explain their success or failure.

Back in 2001, Mantzavinos had already written an outstanding book – *Individuals, Institutions, and Markets* – which explored the micro-foundations of the relationship between behavior, institutions, and markets. The book became a superb example of a successful account that led to an inter-disciplinary approach to the issue of institutions, contributing to overcoming the flaws of previous perspectives on this area. Its analytical power draws on the advances made in the fields of evolutionary biology, cognitive psychology, comparative politics, and political economy.

His analytical framework provides a fertile ground to connect a diverse set of social science research agendas. In Colombia his work has encouraged rich discussions about new ways to understand the logic of public policy and social interventions aimed at building sustainable regional peace, state building, and development efforts in the country.

In order to celebrate the 10th anniversary of “Learning, Institutions, and Economic Performance” – and to encourage inter-disciplinary and inter-sectorial discussions of cognitive institutionalism as a framework for research and policy design – Universidad EAFIT and Universidad Tecnológica del Bolívar

(UTB) invited Professor Mantzavinos to participate in a series of lectures and workshops in Medellín and Cartagena, held between February 2 and 6, 2015. His visit launched the activities of the *Colombian Research Network on Learning, Institutions, and Territorial Peace* and inspired a discussion to think of innovative institutional mechanisms for the formulation, implementation and evaluation of public policies and social interventions related to the challenges of state and peace-building at the local level in sub-regional Colombia.

Andrés Casas (AC): *After your visit to Medellín and Cartagena, what is your reaction to the great interest expressed for your work in our country?*

Chrysostomos Mantzavinos (CM): I am extremely pleased and honored that a series of scholars in Colombia have found my work useful for their own theoretical and practical endeavours. I did know, mainly via my student Pablo Abitbol, that my work on institutions has found a fertile ground in Colombia, but the academic exchange with the scholars gave me the opportunity for a more direct experience, very valuable indeed for the development of my own ideas.

AC: *Much of this interest comes from your comprehensive and integrative view of several disciplines from the natural and the social sciences. To some you are a philosopher, for others an economist, for a great part of your audience and readers, a political scientist. How do you perceive your identity and what have been the advantages and disadvantages of this multidisciplinary character?*

CM: I recall a memorable visit of the late Raymond Boudon to Germany when he had been visiting the Max Planck Institute for Research on Collective Goods in Bonn, where I used to work at the beginning of 2000s. During one of our discussions he started a rather detailed narration about his diverse interests during his youth, mainly in philosophy and sociology. He said that at some point he had to make a choice either to be a philosopher or a sociologist and he had decided on the latter. My hope is that I will not have to make such a choice.

AC: *Your visit to Colombia was organized by EAFIT and the UTB as part of the 10th anniversary of the publication of “Learning, Institutions, and Economic Performance” (LIEP), a paper you co-authored with Douglass North and Sayed Shariq. This work is considered the “manifesto” of the approach you coined as Cognitive Institutionalism (CI). In your opinion, what is the fundamental idea of CI? What innovative element did CI introduce to the study of the social sciences?*

CM: As I see it, the fundamental idea of Cognitive Institutionalism is to explicitly theorize on the cognitive processes when studying institutions. There is a long list of institutionalisms in the social sciences, as you correctly stress in your own textbook with Professor Losada. Opening up the black box of cognitive processes is the crucial novelty introduced by the Cognitive Institutionalism approach. Take, for example, historical institutionalism. Here the main message is that an appropriate understanding of institutions must go hand in hand with an in-depth historical analysis showing how a society's institutions came to be what they are in a long historical process. Cognitive Institutionalism theoretically underpins this idea by stressing that institutions are the 'carriers of history' in virtue of incorporating the history of a society's collective learning. Or take another influential brand of neo-institutionalism, Rational Choice Institutionalism. Here the main message is that institutions are to be explained as the outcomes of choices of rational agents that essentially maximize their self-interest. Cognitive Institutionalism stresses that choice processes are only part of the story and that we have to consistently integrate beliefs into the framework in order to have a more consistent and fruitful theory of individual behavior to work with when analyzing the emergence and change of institutions.

AC: *To be fair, the central ideas of this approach had already been developed brilliantly in your 2001 book Individuals, Institutions and Markets, long before North addressed them in Understanding the Process of Economic Change (2005). What was the creative process that led to LIEP and how did North and Shariq contribute to revising the original ideas of the 2001 publication?*

CM: The project was to write a research agenda for the social sciences integrating the main ideas of my own work, which had already been published, and the ideas of North, who was then working on his own book. Shariq has also provided valuable input. We all met in St. Louis to discuss these issues and I recall that there was a complex figure on the blackboard at Doug's office with all the bits and pieces that he thought were important. We discussed them for two days and then I wrote the first draft of the paper, which we revised down the road towards publication.

AC: *A major criticism of some versions of institutionalism relates to their methodological weaknesses. The big question that remains about CI is that conceptually it offers an infinite source of insight, but it also leaves open a challenging*

empirical task: How can the researcher apply the basic concepts introduced by CI, such as mental models? How can they be operationalized and measured empirically?

CM: Cognitive institutionalism is a general framework. Empirical hypotheses can be generated with the aid of this framework and tested with the help of empirical evidence. Now, I am definitely a pluralist with respect to answering the question of what should be regarded as legitimate evidence. This can be of both a quantitative and qualitative nature, it can come from labor and/or field experiments and, of course, from economic history. Empirical evidence about mental models is available from psychologists and easily accessible at: <https://mentalmodelsblog.wordpress.com/>. It is also important to keep in mind a lesson from philosophy of science: not every term used in a scientific theory is bound to be measurable and/or directly testable. This is a view associated with operationalism, i.e. the notion that we do not know the meaning of a concept unless we have a method of measurement for it. However, this view is obsolete and has long been abandoned. A theory consists of a series of concepts, some more akin to measurement than others. What we are testing are empirical hypotheses consisting of both observational and theoretical terms (i.e. expressions that refer to non-observational entities). The fact that we might not be able to directly observe mental models is not equivalent with the impossibility of testing empirical hypotheses which include or make use of mental models.

AC: *The appropriation of some of your ideas in Colombia has been related to a core aspect of your work on behavior, institutions, and development that touches the root of our problems: the inability to ensure a workable social order and an inclusive wealth-creation game. In your opinion, what is the key element that makes some societies capable of attaining both political and economic equilibria? How could this relate to countries like Colombia?*

CM: This is, of course, the most fundamental puzzle and it would be pretentious to try to give a sensible and complete answer here. I will allow myself just one observation: only if we understand how processes of collective learning unfold in historical time can we ever hope to develop a theory of institutional emergence and change which may in the end ensure a workable social order and an inclusive wealth-creation game.

AC: *Many agree that the strongest contribution of your work on the political economy of development is that it offers the micro-foundations for some key*

mechanisms for understanding why some countries are successful and others are not. But one of the common observations made by critics of cognitive institutionalism is that it is an approach developed by authors who come from developed countries that have very different experiences in comparison to Latin America in terms of state and market formation. What would you say to these critics?

CM: I think that it is not important where the inventors of a theoretical framework such as mine come from. What is important is whether it is found to be empirically valid and whether it is useful in order to intervene in the social world and change it according to our values. And I think that this is the case with my own framework.

AC: *Another important contribution of LIEP is the development of the concept of “path dependence” already studied by North, among others. As you have suggested, a full treatment of the phenomenon of path dependence should start at the cognitive level, proceed at the institutional level, and culminate at the economic level. The Colombian case is a challenging example of path dependence in all its forms (cognitive, institutional and economic). From an evolutionary perspective of institutions, what lessons would be useful in order to steer institutional and economic performance in a more desirable direction?*

CM: I think that the main lesson one can draw from the analysis of path dependence is that political and economic change is incremental. Yes, there are phases of punctuated equilibrium, as one could call them, involving abrupt and rapid changes, but these remain the exceptions. Social and economic change is usually a slow process, mainly due to the slow rate of change of informal institutions, i.e. conventions, social norms, and moral rules. So, paths can change, but never completely and never overnight.

AC: *There is currently a sound debate underway, led by Professor James Robinson, about which fundamental mechanism could help attain peace and make real progress towards the domestication of violence and the possibility of building inclusive institutions in Colombia. Robinson argues that the traditional belief surrounding the importance of land reform as a causal mechanism may not be the best way to go about this. He proposes education as an alternative for altering cognitive path dependence, rather than going down the road of institutional reform. He supports his idea with evidence demonstrating that, in a weak institutional setting with strong local elites – which still seem to be protective agents that are above the*

law – the probability of enforcing land reform laws is low and will result in another empty promise. What is your opinion on this?

CM: That the probability of enforcement of a new legal framework is low does not mean that there might not be points of view from which it would be desirable to initiate and invest resources in introducing and enforcing this new legal framework. Think of the abolition of slavery: the probability of its enforcement was surely low, but this did not mean that there were no points of view from which it was desirable to initiate and invest resources in introducing and enforcing this new legal framework. However, this is a general remark – my knowledge of the specifics of the situation is very limited, and so I would like to abstain from expressing my opinion on this.

AC: *In Cartagena you participated in a workshop dedicated to Learning, Institutions, and Territorial Peace. What was your experience? What seem to be the biggest challenges for local peace-building initiatives?*

CM: I have had a wonderful experience and I have learned a lot from the intellectual exchange with my colleagues. An important point that has emerged from our discussions was that there are two processes unfolding in parallel. There is the international agreement on peace-making going on at the official, governmental level, and there is also the situation on the local level. It is important that people do not perceive their situation as being merely decision-takers, but also as being decision-makers – something which is easier said than done, of course.

AC: *After the publication of LIEP, your work took a major turn towards philosophy, with a particular focus on the philosophy of science. You have prolifically published several works: in particular, Naturalistic Hermeneutics (2005) and Philosophy of the Social Sciences (2009) have drawn a lot of attention. In fact, your new book focuses on explanation. What is the reason behind your interest in a field that has been characterized by endless conflict throughout its history? What is your proposal in this area?*

CM: Thinking about scientific explanation is thinking about the core activity in which millions of people engage when doing theoretical science. Shedding more light on this activity is of obvious importance. My proposal is multifaceted. One aspect concerns what I have just talked about: the need to focus on the explanatory activity rather than on the outcome of this activity, i.e. on explanations themselves, as is usually the case. Once the focus is on the scientific

practices, this opens up a whole range of issues worthy of discussion. My proposal is to theorize on explanatory activities in terms of explanatory games. Scientists use rules of representation, rules of inference, and rules of scope in constant interaction with each other in their collective efforts of providing explanations for phenomena. There is a constant flow of explanations produced while playing the game and the normative question does not consist in providing one eternal ideal of 'the successful explanation' but rather in which rules should be followed and which should not. Good explanations are those that have emerged because good rules have been followed, and working out the criteria of their goodness is not an once-and-for-all matter, but rather a continuous enterprise, taking place with the participation of different kinds of experts and philosophers of science alike.

AC: *Finally, what is next for you? Will you come back to the issue of the relationship between cognition, institutions, and development?*

CM: I do hope that I will be able to come back to this issue before too long. The study of institutions lies at the core of my interests, so that there is no long-term prospect of abandoning it.



Chrysostomos Mantzavinos is Professor of Philosophy of the Social Sciences at the University of Athens (Greece). He holds two PhDs, in Economics and in Philosophy, both from the University of Tübingen (Germany). He is the author of *Wettbewerbstheorie* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1994), *Individuals, Institutions, and Markets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), *Naturalistic Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), and editor of *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). His book on *Explanatory Pluralism* is forthcoming with Cambridge University Press. Mantzavinos is also the Philosophy Section Editor for the 2nd edition of the *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (2015).

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