The Phenomenology of Social Institutions in the Schutzian Tradition[1]

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Abstract: There is a broad consensus that the study of social institutions is one of the fundamental concerns of the social sciences. The idea that phenomenology has ignored this topic is also widely accepted. As against this view, the present paper aims at demonstrating that especially Schutzian phenomenology—that is, the social-phenomenological tradition started by Alfred Schutz and continued by Thomas Luckmann and Peter Berger, among others—provides rich insights on the nature and workings of social institutions that could contribute to enriching the current social-scientific debate on the issue. In order to show this, the authors attempt to unearth and systematically reconstruct Schutz's and Berger and Luckmann's insights on social institutions and to confront them with current approaches.

Keywords: Social Institutions, Alfred Schutz, Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann, Phenomenology.

Introduction

The analysis of the origins, structures, and workings of social institutions is, without a doubt, one of the main concerns of the social sciences. On the one hand, social-scientific literature is full of empirical studies on specific institutions such as National States,[2] mental asylums,[3] concentration camps,[4] and schools.[5] On the other hand, almost all the key figures of classical and contemporary social theory—*e.g.* Émile Durkheim,[6] Talcott Parsons,[7] Anthony Giddens,[8] to only name a few—embark on the task of defining the concept of "social institution."[9]

In a different but nonetheless convergent sense, the phenomenological tradition has also concerned itself with this topic. In this connection, the contributions of Edmund Husserl,[10] Maurice Merleau-Ponty,[11] and Alfred Schutz[12] are especially worthy of mention. As we shall show in the present paper, however, it is the latter thinker who provides the most promising approach to developing a full-fledged phenomenology of social institutions. The strength of this approach, which, from the 1960 onwards, is continued and refined by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann,[13] lies in its combination of phenomenological findings with insights from the theoretical and empirical social sciences.

[2] Cf., for instance, Oscar Oszlack, *La formación del Estado argentino: orden, progreso y organización nacional* (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 2004).

[3] For example, see Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: First Anchor, 1961).

[4] Cf., for instance, Theodore Abel, "The Sociology of Concentration Camps," *Social Forces*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 1951, 150-155.

[5] See, for example, Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

[6] Cf. Émile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 37.

[7] Cf. Talcott Parsons, "Prolegomena to a Theory of Social Institutions," *American Sociological Review,* Vol. 55, No. 3, 1990, 319-333.

[8] See Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory. Action, structure and contradiction in social analysis* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 80.

[9] Uwe Schimank gives an excellent overview on the classical and contemporary social theories of institutions. Uwe Schimank, "Institution," in *Lexikon Soziologie und Sozialtheorie. Hundert Grundbegriffe,* eds. Sina Farzin and Stefan Jordan (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2008), 123-124.

[10] Cf., for instance, Edmund Husserl. *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität: Zweiter Teil: 1921-1928* (Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1973), 405-496.

[11] Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'institution, la passivité. Notes du cours au Collège de France (1954-1955)* (Paris: Belin, 2015).

[12] Cf., for instance, Alfred Schutz, "Concept and Theory Formation in the Social Sciences," in *Collected Papers I. The Problem of Social Reality* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962), 53, 62.

[13] Cf. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality. A treatise in the sociology of knowledge* (New York: Anchor, 1967), 47 ff.

Yet, although Schutzian phenomenology—a term we will use here to refer not only to Schutz's theoretical developments but also to those of his most faithful heirs—has a lot to say about the nature of social institutions, contemporary social scientists tend to disregard its valuable contributions. Indeed, current literature on the issue neglects much of the important insights that can be found in Schutz's and Berger and Luckmann's texts.[14] In our view, this is mainly due to an influential misreading of Schutzian phenomenology that pervades the social sciences since the late 20th century, namely, the one spread by prominent social theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens.

Broadly speaking, Bourdieu and Giddens consider Schutzian phenomenology as a *subjectivist* social theory. That is, as a one-sided social-theoretical approach that merely focus on the voluntary, everyday (inter)subjective (inter)actions taking place at the micro-sociological level, thereby systematically neglecting the constraining, objective, and macro aspects of social reality.[15] Since social institutions are traditionally deemed to be macro-objective social phenomena—*i.e.* systems or structures—it is thought that the Schutzian approach cannot deal with them adequately.[16]

As against this dominant view, in this paper we will argue that Schutzian phenomenology offers an original and exhaustive account of social institutions that can decisively contribute to enriching the current debate on the issue. Indeed, as we shall show, the Schutzian approach is able to achieve

[14] For instance, in the entry on "Social Institutions" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the word "phenomenology" is not mentioned at all, and no papers by Schutz are listed in the bibliography–only his correspondence with Talcott Parsons is mentioned and depicted as an example of the "voluntaristic theory of social action." Seumas Miller, "Social Institutions," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Summer 2019 Edition, ed. Edward N. Zalta (https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/social-institutions/). In the *Encyclopedia of Social Theory,* in turn, Schutz, Berger, and Luckmann are at least mentioned, but no details of their perspectives are given. Harrington, Austin, Barbara I. Marshall and Hans-Peter Müller (eds.), *Encyclopedia of social theory* (London: Routledge, 2005).

[15] Carlos Belvedere, *Problemas de Fenomenología Social. A propósito de Alfred Schutz, las ciencias sociales y las cosas mismas* (Los Polvorines – Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento – Prometeo, 2011), 16, 47. This characterization of Schutzian phenomenology is to be understood within the framework of Bourdieu's and Giddens's attempt to overcome the social-theoretical dualism between subjectivism and objectivism. For an in-depth and critical treatment of this issue, see Carlos Belvedere, *El discurso del dualismo en la Teoría Social Contemporánea. Una crítica fenomenológica* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2012).

[16] In what Giddens calls "orthodox Sociology," social institutions are considered to be a macro-sociological issue, which, in turn, he says, is related to functionalism—not so much to phenomenology, if we may add. See Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory. Action, structure and contradiction in social analysis* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 255. In a similar vein, Pierre Bourdieu argues that the interactionist perspective corresponds to a weak degree of institutionalization of symbolic capital. See *Le sens pratique* (Paris: Minuit, 1980), 240, n6.

something that other contemporary social-theoretical positions cannot: without ever leaving the experiential soil of the everyday lifeworld, it is capable to account for both the (inter)subjective and objective dimensions of institutional realities. In order to sustain the latter claim, in the following pages we will attempt to unearth and systematically reconstruct Schutz's and Berger and Luckmann's neglected insights on social institutions, and to confront them with current approaches.

1. *"Institution" and "Social Institutions": A Lexical Distinction*

In this paper, we will focus on the phenomenology of social institutions. With that aim, we will restrict the concept of institution to what we may call "institutions, in plural," in opposition to "institution, in singular," since it best suits the Schutzian approach. More precisely, we would like to emphasize that our notion of (social) "institutions" is narrower than the broad conception of "institution" widely established in phenomenology, namely, the one inspired by the German word "*Stiftung*" and related to the "institution of sense" [*Sinnstiftung*]. This widespread notion was coined by Husserl[17] and taken up by Schutz himself, for instance, in his critique of the 5th Cartesian Meditation.[18] It is Merleau-Ponty, however, who definitely sutures all meanings of "institution" around this semantic field by translating the Husserlian concept of *Stiftung* as *institution,* an intepretation commonly accepted nowadays.[19]

Despite being commonly accepted, this account is misleading for our purpose at hand: it is equivocal, unspecific, and somewhat lax. As we see it, the interpretation of institution as *Stiftung* is mostly lexical, not technical-philosophical. Of course, important distinctions are implied by it, but they are not always explicitly developed in extent. They are more suggestions than concepts.

Curiously enough, however, phenomenologists engaged in this perspective believe that the circumscribed account of institutions we aim to endorse here is trivial and one-sided. For instance, it has been said that Merleau-Ponty's shift from a research program focused on institutions (in plural) to another

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[17] See Roberto J. Walton, "Autoafección y acontecimiento," in *Problemas de Fenomenología Material. Investigaciones en torno a la filosofía de Michel Henry*, ed. Mario Lipsitz and Carlos Belvedere (Los Polvorines: Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento, 2016), 26.

[18] Alfred Schutz, "The Problem of Transcendental Intersubjectivity in Husserl," *Schutzian Research* 2 (2010), 21ff.

[19] See Mariana Larison, "Presentación. Merleau-Ponty y los cursos en el Collège de France," in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La institución. La pasividad. Notas de cursos en el Collège de France (1954-1955), vol. I. La institución en la historia personal y pública*, (Barcelona: Antrhopos, 2012), XI-XIII. For instance, Stephen H. Watson makes an extensive use of this interpretation all over his book *Phenomenology, Institution and History. Writings After Merleau-Ponty II*, (London and New York: Continuum, 2009).

one centered on the notion of institution (in singular) testifies to a certain "discomfort" as regards the former program. In this view, research on concrete institutions seems to require a preliminary analysis of the very notion of institution,[20] which, in turn, would help overcome the notion of constitution[21] and its connection to the network of concepts related to the philosophy of consciousness.[22]

Some heirs of this tradition, however, have gone further, like Cornelius Castoriadis. When referring to what we call social institutions or "institutions in plural," he uses the periphrasis: "institutions in the second-order and customary sense of the term."[23] This implies a pejorative use of the concept of institutions in plural, with which we do not agree. Social institutions are neither secondary institutions nor minor issues. Nor are they easy to access and elucidate.

Furthermore, this interpretation involves a false dilemma, which stems from forcing the immanent contradictions of an unfinished thought, semi-elaborated in the thread of orality. There is no concrete institution without foundation, sedimentation, and reactivation or mutation of meaning, just as there is no institution of meaning that does not arise from—or eventually end up being translated into—a concrete institutionality. Thus, this skein is harder to unravel than it seems, and what can be found in Merleau-Ponty's latest work is nothing more than suggestive indications.

For the above reasons, we will not deal here with such a large philosophical subject as the institution of sense,[24] but rather with the more precise concept of institutions, even if the latter presupposes the former. More specifically, we

[20] Mariana Larison, "Presentación. Merleau-Ponty y los cursos en el Collège de France," VIII.

[21] Seen this way, instituting is not constituting. Cf. Caterina Rea, "The Origin of Corporeal Ipseity: Between Lag and Institution," in *Time, Memory, Institution. Merleau-Ponty's New Ontology of Self* (ed. David Morris and Kym Maclaren, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2015), 191.

[22] Mariana Larison, "Presentación. Merleau-Ponty y los cursos en el Collège de France," X. Furthermore, the notion of institution would not only come to remedy the difficulties of the philosophy of conscience—it would be almost its opposite. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'institution, la passivité. Notes du cours au Collège de France (1954-1955)*, 44-45, 48. For some scholars, this would allow Merleau-Ponty "to twist free of Husserlian idealism and be more radical." Robert Vallier, "Memory—Of the Future: Institution and Memory in the Later Merleau-Ponty," in *Time, Memory, Institution. Merleau-Ponty's New Ontology of Self*, 122, ed. David Morris and Kym Maclaren (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2015).

[23] Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005), 369.

[24] Nor do we refer to institution in the broad sense it has in Cornelius Castoriadis, namely, as "the institution of society." Castoriadis designates as institutions many other things than the ones considered here. For instance, "the institution of time," "the institution of things," "the institution of the world," and the like. Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005), 186ff, 200, 202ff, 334, 353ff.

will focus on the syntagma "social institutions," which was frequently used by Schutz. From a Schutzian perspective, examples of social institutions are: language, religion, arts, science, nations, goverments, the post system, schools, courts, public utilities, the market, prices, bank systems, currency, and salary.[25]

Although Husserl does not use the term "institution" (he speaks of "social associations" [*soziale Verbindungen*]), in some of his writings he also deals with social institutions in this sense. Occassionaly, he analizes social formations such as "States" or "cities," which he conceives as "social personalities" or "personalities of higher order."[26] These social formations, he says, possess a common or general will which is distinct from each citizen's individual will—for instance, a State has a "Will of the State" [*Staatswille*]. Analogously to the will of the individual subject, this social will is ego-centered and entails a permanent and habitual orientation of volition and acts.[27] Husserl also speaks of less crystallized social institutions such as friendship and marriage. They are, he argues, social bonds arising between persons, consisting of "dispositions" through which one relates to another in such a manner that they both are—or can be—aware of this reciprocal relationship.[28]

Sometimes, even Merleau-Ponty refers to institutions in the narrower meaning defined here,[29] regardless of his wider interpretation of institution as *Stiftung*. As he claims, social institutions such as language, durable political structures, and judicial systems "cement the historical unity and identity of a society."[30] This, by the way, matches Schutz's idea that "the 'texture of meaning' of the life-world" has been instituted by human actions.[31]

[25] Alfred Schutz, "The social world and the theory of social action," in *Collected Papers II. Studies in Social Theory* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), 5; "The problem of rationality in the social world," in *Ibid.,* 84; "The well-informed citizen: an essay on the social distribution of knowledge," in *Ibid.,* 121; "Reflections on the Problem of Relevance," in *Collected Papers V. Phenomenological Phenomenology and the Social Sciences* (Dordrecht/Heidelberg/London/New York: Springer, 2011), 177.

[26] Edmund Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität: Zweiter Teil: 1921-1928* (Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1973), 405-496.

[27] *Ibid.* Schutz criticizes Husserl's account of the personalities of higher order. According to the Viennese thinker, this account ends up hypostatizing collective subjectivities. See, for instance, Alfred Schutz, "The Problem of Transcendental Intersubjectivity in Husserl," 47 ff.

[28] Edmund Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität: Erster Teil: 1905-1920* (Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1973), 101.

[29] For instance, he reflects on marriage and kinship as institutions. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'institution, la passivité*, 149, 155, 165. Also Robert Vallier, in his study on Merleau-Ponty, analyzes various "modalities of institution." Robert Vallier, "Memory—Of the Future: Institution and Memory in the Later Merleau-Ponty," in *Time, Memory, Institution. Merleau-Ponty's New Ontology of Self,* 110.

[30] William S. Hamrick, *An Existential Phenomenology of Law: Maurice Merleau-Ponty* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1987), 43.

[31] *Ibid.* Here Hamrick quotes Schutz (1967: 10): "the texture of meaning […] originates

2. The Founding Contributions of Alfred Schutz to the Phenomenology of Social Institutions

Even if scarce and occasional references to social institutions can be found in the work of previous phenomenologists, it is Schutz who established the basis for a genuine phenomenological approach to this field of research. Accordingly, our starting point will be an attempt to systematize his founding contributions. This is needed since they are scattered throughout his work: they appear in different papers where Schutz addresses a diversity of issues. When considered as a whole, however, these disperse insights show a recognizable coherence. Our first task will be to reconstruct it.

Schutz uses the syntagma "social institutions" to refer to "social phenomena" that are highly relevant for the social sciences, particularly for sociology.[32] In his view, social institutions should be added as a fifth scheme of reference in the study of social phenomena, along with the other four schemes proposed by Florian Znaniecki (*i.e.*, social personality, social act, social group, social relations). In particular, social institutions should be considered (along with social relationships and social groups) as an "objective scheme of reference," not as a subjective one.[33]

Institutions consist in a kind of knowledge at hand "determined by the systems of motivational relevances prevailing at the time in any situation" that makes it possible for us to achieve our purposes, obtaining the intended results through pre-established procedures.[34] This knowledge, in turn, is symbolic in nature:

> institutionalized social relations are […] not real entities within the province
> of meaning of the everyday lifeworld but constructs of commonsense thinking
> that belong to a different subuniverse, perhaps that which W. James called the
> subuniverse of ideal relations. For this reason, we can apprehend them only

in and has been instituted by human actions, our own and our fellow-men's, contemporaries and predecessors. All cultural objects—tools, symbols, language systems, works of art, social institutions, etc.—point back by their very origin and meaning to the activities of human subjects. For this reason we are always conscious of the historicity of culture which we encounter in traditions and customs. This historicity is capable of being examined in its reference to human activities of which it is the sediment." Alfred Schutz, "Common-sense and scientific interpretation of human action," in *Collected Papers I. The Problem of Social Reality* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), 10.

[32] Alfred Schutz, "The Theory of Social Action: Text and Letters with Talcott Parsons," in *Collected Papers V*, 34; "The social world and the theory of social action," in *Collected Papers II*, 6.

[33] *Ibid.,* 7

[34] Alfred Schutz, "Reflections on the Problem of Relevance," 177.

symbolically; but the symbols appresenting these entities themselves pertain to the paramount reality of the life-world and motivate our actions within it.[35]

Although Schutz considers that social institutions dominate "our present culture"[36] and that in the social world we live in "we rely upon the fact [that they] will function," they are not a peculiar feature of *our* time. On the contrary, as human beings, we are always born into a world of social institutions in which "we have to find our bearings" and with which "we have to come to terms."[37] Thus, social institutions are a part of the social world naively accepted in the natural attitude, a world that was created by "the alter egos," to whose existence we orient our activities.[38] And, as Schutz argues, "any in-group has a relatively natural concept of the world which its members take for granted."[39]

More precisely, three main features can be distinguished in Schutz's account. Social institutions (1) refer to other people's mental activity, (2) they allow us to master our daily life, and (3) they are composed of typified patterns of social interactions that are distinctive of group life. Let us consider each of these traits in some detail.

(1) First, institutions are social things designed for a purpose by other human beings.[40] Thus, "in their meaning and origin" they "refer to human actions […] to its meaning for the person who orients his behavior by it."[41] Insofar as they were "created by other people's activity," they have their own "history, genesis, and construction."[42] For instance, social institutions "refer to the world of my contemporaries […] or point back to the world of my predecessors […] because I can always interpret them as testimony to the conscious life of human beings […] who adhered to these institutions."[43]

[35] Alfred Schutz, "Fourth Notebook from Minnewaska and New York City. October 26 - November 9, 1958," in Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life-World,* Volume II (London: Heinemann, 1989c), 291.

[36] Alfred Schutz, "Reflections on the Problem of Relevance," 177.

[37] Alfred Schutz, "Second Notebook from Seelisberg. August 17 – 18, 1958," in Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life-World,* Volume II (London: Heinemann, 1989b), 237.

[38] Alfred Schutz, "The social world and the theory of social action," in *Collected Papers II. Studies in Social Theory* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), 5.

[39] Alfred Schutz, "The well-informed citizen: an essay on the social distribution of knowledge," 121.

[40] Alfred Schutz, "The social world and the theory of social action," 10.

[41] Alfred Schutz, "First Notebook from Seelisberg, Switzerland. August 12 – 16, 1958," in Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life-World,* Volume II (London: Heinemann, [1983] 1989a), 208.

[42] Alfred Schutz, "The problem of rationality in the social world," 71.

[43] Alfred Schutz, "The dimensions of the social world," in *Collected Papers II. Studies in Social Theory* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), 43. Although Schutz does not mention it in this quote, social institutions can also refer to our consociates.

(2) Second, institutions are a part of the organized patterns of routines that allow us to master "most of the problems of daily life"[44] without the "need to define or redefine situations which have occurred so many times or to look for new solutions of old problems hitherto handled satisfactorily."[45] As Burke Thomason notes, Schutz refers to "the different degrees of institutionalization" obtained in various societies and in particular sectors of the same society: the firmness of institutions varies according to "the degree to which reciprocal schemes of typifications are employed." [46] For Schutz, "[t]he more instituzionalized or standardized a behavior pattern is, […] the greater is the chance that my own self-typifying behavior will bring about the state of affairs aimed at."[47]

(3) Third, institutions are a kind of "cultural pattern of group life"[48] which the individual has to interiorize and use in order to "define his personal unique situation" and fulfill his particular, "personal interests."[49] These patterns mainly consist of typifications and relevances that define objective meanings; for instance, social roles and role expectations.[50] In this view,

> role expectations are nothing but typifications of interaction patterns which are socially approved ways of solving typical problems, and are frequently

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[44] In this regard, institutions are crucial for mastering the pragmatic tasks and imperatives of everyday life and belong in this sense to the quotidian "world of working." As Michael Barber in line with Schutz's account of the "multiple realities" claims, however, the lifeworld also includes "non-pragmatic finite provinces of meaning" such as humor and religion, which can be seen as forms of "emancipation from the 'world of working.'" In this sense, it is possible to claim that some social institutions—*e.g.* religious institutions such as churches, temples or meditation communities, etc.—provide a framework for emancipating social actors from the burden of the practical imperatives of everyday life. We will not follow this idea here, but we think it provides an interesting starting point for developing a non-pragmatic account of social institutions. See Michael Barber, *Religion and Humor as Emancipating Provinces of Meaning* (Cham: Springer, 2017), 219.

[45] Alfred Schutz, "The homecomer," in *Collected Papers II. Studies in Social Theory* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), 108.

[46] Burke C. Thomason, *Making Sense of Reification. Alfred Schutz and constructionist theory* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1982), 102. For an in-depth analysis of Schutz's account of the habituality and typicality of everyday experience, see Gros, A. E., "The Typicality and Habituality of Everyday Cognitive Experience in Alfred Schutz's Phenomenology of the Lifeworld" (Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy, Vol. 9, 2017), 63-85.

[47] Alfred Schutz, "Common-sense and scientific interpretation of human action," in *Collected Papers I. The Problem of Social Reality* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), 26.

[48] Alfred Schutz, "The stranger," in *Collected Papers II. Studies in Social Theory* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), 92.

[49] Alfred Schutz, "Equality and the meaning structure of the social world," in *Collected Papers II. Studies in Social Theory* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), 253.

[50] *Ibid.*

institutionalized. Consequently, they are arranged in domains of relevances which in turn are ranked in a particular order originating in the group's relative natural conception of the world, its folkways, mores, morals, etc.[51]

In this sense, Schutz argues that what Talcott Parsons calls the "social system" can be re-interpreted "as an interlaced network of positions, each defined by a socially approved typification of particular interaction-patterns."[52]

We can now summarize Schutz's founding contributions to the phenomenology of social institutions as follows. Institutions are a kind of knowledge at hand determined by the system of motivational relevances prevailing in any situation which makes it possbile for a person to achieve his purposes at hand, obtaining the intended results through pre-established procedures. They are also a part of the social world naively accepted in the natural attitud of the in-group; *i.e.*, they belong to the relative natural conception of the world taken-for-granted by its members.

More specifically, institutons are composed of typified patterns of social interactions which are distinctive of group life. They are an organized pattern of routines that allow people to master the problems of daily life without the need of redefining situations that have occurred many times before or of looking for new solutions to old problems that have already been handled satisfactorily. Finally, institutions are cultural patterns of group life consisting of typifications and relevances that define objective meanings such as social roles and role expectations, among others.

3. *Continuing Schutz's Legacy: Thomas Luckmann and Peter Berger*

Burke Thomason argues that, even if for Schutz the "paramount reality" of everyday life involves "a kind of institutionalized consensus,"[53] he "did not present an articulated theory of institutionalization," which Berger and Luckmann actualy did.[54] Seen this way, Berger and Luckmann would complete Schutz's fragmentary contributions to the phenomenology of social institutions. Particularly, Thomason considers that Schutz would have agreed with the anthropological conception implied in Berger and Luckmann's account of institutions as a "closing" of the human world:[55] institutions "alone can pattern and channel human conduct in such a way as to preclude successfully

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[51] Alfred Schutz, "The social world and the theory of social action," 269.

[52] *Ibid.*

[53] Burke C. Thomason, *Making Sense of Reification,* 110.

[54] *Ibid.,* 103-104.

[55] *Ibid.* 104. The idea that the institutionalization of action in social settings refers "to the action of my fellow-men, my predecessors," whose action points back to "the meaning that they

that overwhelming 'problem of choice' which man's openness to the world would pose if left unchecked. Schutz seems to agree with the view of man behind this account."[56]

In comparison with Schutz's fragmentary, unarticulated considerations on social institutions,[57] Berger and Luckmann's social theory contains a full-fledged account of them.[58] Although it draws upon manifold theoretical sources—classical sociological theory, German philosophical anthropology, symbolic interactionism, and the young Marx's dialectical thinking—, this account is to be understood as Schutzian, insofar as it continues and deepens Schutz's fragmentary but nonethelss rich insights on the matter.

One among many ways in which Berger and Luckmann continue Schutz's ideas is by confronting them with structural-functional theory. As opposed to Parsons's objectivism, and decisively influenced by Weber and Schutz, Berger and Luckmann[59] claim that social institutions—which for them are the para-digmatic manifestation of "society as objective reality"[60]— *are constructed by human beings.* "Both in its genesis […] and its existence in any instant of time," the institutional social order "is a human product."[61]

On this account, far from existing in itself as ready-made and quasi-natural objectivities, social institutions are always being produced and reproduced in everyday life through meaningful social actions performed by individuals. These actions, in turn—and this is crucial—, are always guided by socially derived pre-theoretical knowledge—*i.e.* cognitive and practical typifications in the Schutzian sense.

Now, for Berger and Luckmann[62] emphasizing the *constructed* nature of social institutions does not imply denying their "objective facticity," let alone falling into the trap of voluntarist subjectivism.[63] In line with Durkheim, the authors argue that once intersubjectively produced, social institutions tend to "harden" and solidify, thereby becoming *objective realities*, *i.e.*, "things" that

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have connected with their action," can also be found in Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life-World,* (London: Heinemann. 1974), 16.

[56] Burke C. Thomason, *Making Sense of Reification,* 104.

[57] *Ibid.,* 110.

[58] Cf. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 47-138.

[59] *Ibid.*, 18, 189; cf. Bernt Schnettler, *Thomas Luckmann* (Konstanz: UVK, 2006), 85.

[60] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality,* 47.

[61] *Ibid.*, 52.

[62] *Ibid.*, 18.

[63] Berger's and Luckmann's analysis of the *objective* moments of social reality does not constitute a novelty with respect to Schutz's account. The latter also analyzes the external, imposed, and coercitive character of social institutions. Arguably, what is new and original in the work of these authors is the Marx-inspired attempt of integrating Durkheimian and Weberian insights by means of dialectical thinking.

confront human beings as being rigid, external, and independent from their volition.[64] In a similar vein to the "reality of the natural world," these social objectivities turn into "undeniable facts" that impose unescapable constraints upon the individual subject: "He cannot wish them away. They resist his attempts to change or evade them. They have coercive power over him."[65]

Consequently, the authors do not understand social institutions as hypostatized entities that exist independently from human action. Rather, inspired by Weber and Schutz, they consider them as—webs of—"social relationships" [*soziale Beziehungen*] of a particular kind.[66] As Thomas Luckmann suggests in a 1993 paper,[67] the social relationships that constitute institutions have a peculiarity: the probability of conformity of individual actions with intersubjective expectations is especially high. Indeed, it almost reaches the level of "intersubjective certainty."[68]

In general terms, the stability and certitude of institutionalized social relationships is made possible by the establishment of an "assemblage of 'programmed actions,'"[69] that is, a fixed system of "reciprocal typifications of habitualized actions by type of actors."[70] As it will be shown, processes of "social

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[64] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality,* 1, 59.

[65] *Ibid.,* 59-60. Berger and Luckmann's account represents an attempt to *integrate* what are usually considered the two extremes poles of classical social-theoretical thought, namely, Weber's "subjectivist" theory of social action and Durkheim's "objectivist" theory of institutions. [Cf. Thomas Luckmann, *Wissen und Gesellschaft: Ausgewählte Aufsätze 1981-2002* (Konstanz: UVK, 2002), 105-106; Pierre Bourdieu, "Social Space and Symbolic Power," *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 7, No. 1 1989]. As is well known, whereas the former sees the subject matter of sociology in the "subjective meaning-complex of action," the latter considers "social facts as things." For the authors of *The Social Construction of Reality*, these two positions are by no means irreconcilable. On the contrary, they "can be combined in a comprehensive theory of social action that does not lose the inner logic of either." Social reality, they say, is *both* an objective *and* a subjective reality: *qua* institution, it has "objective facticity;" *qua* action, it possess "subjective meaning." "Society does indeed possess objective facticity. And Society is indeed built up by activity that expresses subjective meaning. It is precisely the dual character of society […] that makes its 'reality *sui generis*.'" Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality,* 18, 185-186.

[66] Cf. Thomas Luckmann, *Wissen und Gesellschaft*, 106, 112-113. Broadly speaking, Weber defines social relationships as *reciprocally* oriented actions performed by a "plurality of actors." Far from having a substantial reality, he argues, these mutually referred social actions merely exist as the "*probability*" [*Chance*] that actors will behave in the expected way. Max Weber, *Soziologische Grundbegriffe* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck/ UTB), § 3. Our emphasis.

[67] Thomas Luckmann, *Wissen und Gesellschaft,* 2002: 112-113.

[68] *Ibid.*

[69] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality,* 75.

[70] *Ibid.*, 54. From an action-theoretical perspective that draws upon Schutz, Berger, and Luckmann, the German sociologist Uwe Schimank defines social institutions as "socially established, meaningful orientations of action of normative, cognitive, and evaluative nature (which regulate what actors must, can, and want to do [*das Sollen, das Können und das Wollen*])." These

control," "socialization," and "legitimation" play a key role in ensuring the firmness of institutional orders.[71]

More precisely, when acting in institutional settings, individuals know what to reciprocally expect from each other. This is because social institutions stipulate the existence of certain "types of actors," or "social roles," that habitually perform actions of a certain type.[72] "The institution posits that actions of type x will be performed by actors of type x."[73] At the "university," for instance, "students" know for sure what kinds of actions are routinely carried out by "professors" —*e.g.* "giving exams" and "lectures"—, and viceversa.

According to Berger and Luckmann,[74] institutional programs of social action are normally established as a means of confronting "life problems" of *vital importance* for social existence, that is, "permanent" social problems that recurrently and ineluctably appear in everyday social interaction. Among these essential issues inherent to sociality are: sexuality, communication, work, education, violence, etc.[75] As Luckmann,[76] in line with Arnold Gehlen, puts it, insofar as institutions univocally "solve" once and for all these vital social problems, they have a "relief-function" [*Entlastungsfunktion*] for human beings.

As the authors claim, the anthropological "advantage" of social institutions *as such* is clear: when it comes to dealing with fundamental—and, in some cases, life-or-death—issues, they free individuals from the burden, insecurities, and dangers of having to "coordinate" social actions every time anew.[77] To be sure, however, the institutionally established "solutions" to recurring social problems are neither the only possible nor the "objectively correct" ones; rather, they are historically and culturally contingent, and even arbitrary.[78]

Now, as said above, without abandoning the Weberian-Schutzian theoretical framework, Berger and Luckmann[79] also argue that social institutions are characterized by the typical features of Durkheimian social facts, namely,

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orientations, he says, can also be understood as "norms of appropriate conduct" and are either formal—"law," "organizational regulations"—or informal—"mores," "conventions," "customs." Uwe Schimank, "Institution," in *Lexikon Soziologie und Sozialtheorie. Hundert Grundbegriffe,* eds. Sina Farzin and Stefan Jordan (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2008), 123-124.

[71] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 54 ff.

[72] *Ibid.*, 74.

[73] *Ibid.*, 54.

[74] *Ibid.*, 58, 70; Thomas Luckmann, *Wissen und Gesellschaft*, 112.

[75] Cf. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality,* 58.

[76] *Ibid.*, 112.

[77] *Ibid.*; cf. *Ibid.*, 57. See also Schutz and Luckmann's analysis of typifications in *The Structures of the Life-World, Volume I,* 1973, 99 ff.

[78] Thomas Luckmann, *Wissen und Gesellschaft*, 112.

[79] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality,* 58 ff.

"exteriority"—and moral—"coercion."[80] Indeed, in spite of being products of human activity, the firmness of institutional programs of action is such that the individual *experiences* them as "objective" realities possessing "a reality of their own."[81] In a similar vein to natural facts and laws, institutionalized social relationships appear to social actors as rock-solid, external, and "unalterable" things.[82]

As the authors argue, institutions *qua* social facts have a "coercive power" over the individual actor, insofar as they—either directly or indirectly—*punish* his deviations from the established order.[83] This coercion manifests itself not only in form of established mechanisms of direct and explicit sanctions—*i.e.* punitive laws and policies enforced by a "coercitive apparatus" [*Erzwingungsstab*]—,[84] but also in the silent but persistent *resistance* that social institutions offer against any attempt to "evade" or modify them. In effect, institutional realities also penalize deviated conduct "by the sheer force of their facticity."[85]

In this manner, institutions exercise "*social control*" over everyday (inter) individual action.[86] By coercive means, they establish, regularize, and stabilize certain typical forms of reciprocal action among certain "social roles":

> Institutions […], by the very fact of their existence, control human conduct by setting up predefined patterns of conduct, which channel it in one direction as against the many other directions that would be theoretically possible […]. To say that a segment of human activity has been institutionalized is already to say that this segment of human activity has been subsumed under social control.[87]

Going back to our example, both students and professors experience the university as an objective and solid reality that possesses a coactive power over them. In this sense, their actions are socially controlled. They both know that if they do not comply with the expectations attached to their social roles, they will be punished—*e.g.* if a professor refuses to give lectures, he might be fired. In this sense, in an institutional setting, a deviation from the actions ascribed to a social role is not merely perceived as a "disappointment" of expectations, but rather as non-compliance with a "duty" or "obligation" [*Verpflichtung*].[88] Furthermore,

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[80] Thomas Luckmann, *Wissen und Gesellschaft*, 112.
[81] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality,* 58, 60.
[82] *Ibid.*
[83] *Ibid.*, 55, 60.
[84] Thomas Luckmann, *Wissen und Gesellschaft*, 112.
[85] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality,* 60.
[86] *Ibid.*, 55. Our emphasis.
[87] *Ibid.*
[88] Thomas Luckmann, *Wissen und Gesellschaft*, 113. The authors' claim that institutions

the university *qua* institution "resists" any attempt of its members to change or revolutionize its program and rules—for instance, students will not have it easy if they try to abolish written exams as assessment methods.

4. *Institutionalization Processes and Social Interaction (Berger and Luckmann Continued)*

Social institutions do not just come out of the blue, neither are they eternal, uncreated entities. On the contrary, they "always have a history, of which they are product."[89] They emerge in processes of intersubjective action located in the past that can—and should—be theoretically reconstructed. And this is one of the most important issues addressed in *The Social Construction of Reality*. There, Berger and Luckmann provide a *phenomenological* analysis of "institutionalization" [*Institutionalisierung*],[90] an issue that tends to be neglected by classical and contemporary social theory.[91] Broadly speaking, the latter concept designates the complex process through which firm and stable social institutions arise from "fugacious" everyday social interactions.[92]

According to Berger and Luckmann,[93] "all actions repeated once or more tend to be habitualized to some degree."[94] The authors support this claim with philosophical—*i.e.* proto-sociological—arguments. *Phenomenologically* speaking, subjective experience characterizes itself by its tendency to typification and habitualization in the Husserlian-Schutzian sense. And, as said above, from a *philosophical-anthropological* perspective informed by Gehlen, routinization processes have a relief function [*Entlastungsfunktion*] for human beings.

More precisely put, because of recurrent and regular social interactions, habitualized patterns of "reciprocal typification" emerge, that is, "taken-for-granted routines" that organize and stabilize everyday social relationships between X and Y.[95] For Berger and Luckmann, besides *relieving* both individuals

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involve duties and obligations allows to counteract a classic objection to the Schutzian tradition, namely, that it neglects the normative nature of social order. Berger and Luckmann's insistence on this topic, as well as their constant reference to Durkheim, testify to the fact that phenomenological sociology provides an in-depth treatment of social normativity.

[89] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality,* 55.

[90] *Ibid.,* 54 ff.

[91] Thomas Luckmann, *Wissen und Gesellschaft*, 109 ff.

[92] *Ibid.*, 111; cf. Bernt Schnettler, *Thomas Luckmann*, 103.

[93] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality,* 57.

[94] As Husserl notes in a well-known passage of the *Cartesian Meditations*, once a child has seen the final sense of scissors, he will always recognize them at the first glance as scissors. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1960), § 50, 111.

[95] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality,* 55 ff.

from the burdens of constant decision-making and allowing them to save great amounts of physical and psychological energy, the "most important gain" of routinization is that "interactions become predictable": thanks to it, X is now able to forecast in advance Y's typical actions, and *vice versa.*[96]

As the authors suggest, the *predictability* of intersubjective interactions is critical for the stability and development of both individual and social life. Indeed, especially when it comes to dealing with *fundamental* life problems, the unpredictability of Y's action could be a "potential danger" for X.[97] This—and also the weight of the "rudimentary 'historicity'" of these interactions[98]—explains why a *proto-morality*—that is, a "reciprocal obligation of action" [*wechselseitige Handlungsverpflichtung*]—arises from the habitualization of everyday interactions.[99]

Differently put, although there is still neither a coercive apparatus nor full-blown obligations and norms, in this primitive stage of the institutionalization process a "*primary form of social control*" emerges.[100] Both X and Y feel the "obligation" of acting in the habitual way.[101] And they both perceive each other's deviations from the routine not as mere disappointments of cognitive expectations, but rather as transgressions of a duty that must be punished.[102] At this stage, thus, this reciprocal typification of action acquires a *proto-*"objectivity" in Durkheim's sense.[103]

The authors consider these interactional processes of routinization not as "institutions" proper, but rather as "*proto-institutions.*"[104] In them, some of the fundamental features of institutional realities are "already present *in nucleo*": they entail relatively fixed mutual typifications of habitualized actions that show an "incipient" objectivity and a proto-morality.[105] Nevertheless, as it will be shown, other essential traits of institutional realities are absent, namely, the solidification of an "objective" "program" of social action, a well-established role-structure, proper mechanisms of social control, and processes of socialization and legitimation.

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[96] *Ibid.*

[97] *Ibid.*

[98] Thomas Luckmann, *Wissen und Gesellschaft*, 113.

[99] *Ibid.*, 111-112; cf. Bernt Schnettler, *Thomas Luckmann*, 104.

[100] Bernt Schnettler, *Thomas Luckmann*, 104.; Thomas Luckmann, *Wissen und Gesellschaft*, 112.

[101] *Ibid.*, 112-113.

[102] *Ibid.,* 113.

[103] *Ibid.*, 112; Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality,* 58.

[104] Thomas Luckmann, *Wissen und Gesellschaft*, 114; our emphasis. Cf. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality,* 57-58.

[105] *Ibid.* Thomas Luckmann, *Wissen und Gesellschaft*, 112.

According to Berger and Luckmann,[106] institutionalization moves to a higher level with the arrival of a "third party." That is, proto-institutions become *proper institutions* the moment they are "passed on" to a new generation. Only then, the incipient intersubjective order constructed by X and Y "hardens" to become a full-blown social fact in the Durkheimian sense.[107]

At the above-described stage of proto-institutionalization, the objectivity of routine patterns of interaction "remains tenuous."[108] This is because X and Y know they themselves constructed the incipient intersubjective order: they can "remember" how, when, and where they did it. Therefore, they are aware of the contingent nature of proto-institutions and see them as modifiable and even abolishable.[109]

As the authors argue, the situation drastically changes when X and Y have to socialize their children into this incipient social reality. At this moment, the (proto-)institutional order "'thickens' and 'hardens,'" thereby acquiring *full-fledged objectivity*.[110] Indeed, as opposed to their parents, children do not experience the (proto-)social world transmitted to them as *a* conventional construction that dates back to past interactions. Rather, they experience it as *the* necessary, undeniable, and unmodifiable nature of things, that is, in an analogous manner to that in which adults see the natural world.[111]

For children, in effect, there is not a substantial difference between the objectivity of natural and social reality: the (proto-)institutional world they learn through socialization "becomes *the* world."[112] Insofar as they are not able to "remember" its historical origins—they were not even alive back then—, they cannot see it as *a* contingent construction that *could be otherwise*. "Since they had no part in shaping it, it confronts them as a given reality that, like nature, is opaque in places at least."[113]

In the socialization process, the objectivity of the social order is further solidified by the emergence of a proper morality and the instauration of mechanisms of social control. As Berger and Luckmann[114] claim, when children are born, X and Y see themselves confronted with a difficult problem that threatens the incipient stability of the incipient (proto-)institutional order they created, namely, that of the "compliance" of the new generation. For "it

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[106] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality,* 58.
[107] *Ibid.*
[108] *Ibid.*
[109] *Ibid.,* 59.
[110] *Ibid.*
[111] *Ibid.*
[112] *Ibid.*
[113] *Ibid.*
[114] *Ibid.,* 59, 62.

is more likely that one will deviate from programs set up for one by others that from programs that one has helped established oneself."[115]

As a consequence of this problem, for X and Y, the (proto-)social world "loses its playful quality and becomes 'serious.'"[116] When they pass on their intersubjective routine world to children, the "there we go again"—characteristic of the stage of proto-institutionalization—becomes a "*this is how these things are done.*"[117] This not only hardens the objectivity of the social order for the latter, but also for the former; and this because of a "mirror effect." As Berger and Luckmann write, "if one says 'This is how these things are done' often enough, one believes it oneself." [118]

Arguably, the idea of "*This is how these things are done*" entails the core of morality and social control. It goes without saying that if the child does not do things *as they are done*, he will be *sanctioned*. "The children must be 'taught to behave' and, once taught, must be 'kept in line';" "the institutional definition of situations" must be "maintained over individual temptations at redefinition."[119] In this connection, the establishment of social "sanctions" and specific mechanisms of social control plays a key role. And as said above, legitimation processes also do.[120]

5. *Institutionalization as an Objectivation of Human Activity: A Central Argument in "The Social Construction of Reality"*

So far we presented Berger and Luckmann's account of social institutions and institutionalization processes. Given its importance, we will consider in some detail their core argument, namely, that social institutions emerge from everyday interactions through a process of objectivation[121]. As we have seen, the authors' claim is that, when social action becomes habitual and typical, it gets chrystalized and objectivated, which allows for the sedimentation of its meaning in individual and social stocks of knowledge. In this section, we will focus on this highly relevant argument in order to better grasp its deepest meaning.

[115] *Ibid.,* 62.
[116] *Ibid.,* 59.
[117] *Ibid.*; our emphasis.
[118] *Ibid.,* 60.
[119] *Ibid.,* 62.
[120] Space limitations preclude us from presenting Berger and Luckmann's account of legitimation. Cf. *Ibid.* 92 ff.
[121] For further discussion on this, see Carlos Belvedere, "La habituación como génesis de las instituciones sociales. Exposición, crítica y reformulación de un argumento central de *La construcción social de la realidad*," in *Objetividad, subjetividad y vida cotidiana. A 50 años de la aparición de* La construcción social de la realidad *de Peter Berger y Tomas Luckmann* (eds. David E. Builes M. and Federico Vélez Vélez, Manizales: Universidad de Manizales, 2019), 41-59.

As said, Berger and Luckmann base their argument on the idea that "all human activity is subject to habitualization."[122] Accordingly,

> [a]ny action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be reproduced with an economy of effort and which, *ipso facto,* is apprehended by its performer *as* that pattern. Habitualization further implies that the action in question may be performed again in the future in the same manner and with the same economical effort.[123]

The fact that habitual actions may be performed again and again in the same manner narrows the possible choices for the individual, so that it becomes "unnecessary for each situation to be defined anew, step by step." Indeed, a new situation "may be subsumed under its predefinitions," and the action to be undertaken "can then be anticipated."[124]

Because of its pre-defined character, habitual action has a typical meaning that becomes a part of the general stock of knowledge taken for granted in a given society.[125] And when those typifications are reciprocal and performed by typical actors, institutionalization occurs.[126]

When institutions are crystallized, they are "experienced as existing over and beyond the individuals who 'happen to' embody them at the moment." That is, they are experienced as possessing "a reality of their own" that "confronts the individual as an external and coercive fact."[127] Even if institutions are the product of human activity, once established, they present themselves as endowed with objectivity.

On the one hand, thus, when they are *in status nascendi,* "institutions are constructed and maintained" in interactions endowed with a "tenuous" objectivity and therefore are "easily changeable."[128] In other words, they remain "fairly accessible to deliberate intervention" by those who have constructed them: they retain "the possibility of changing them or even abolishing them," insofar as they are alone responsible for having shaped this world "in the course of a shared biography which they can remember."[129] *On the other hand*,

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[122] *Ibid.,*53.
[123] *Ibid.*; Berger and Luckmann's emphasis.
[124] *Ibid.,* 54.
[125] *Ibid.,* 53.
[126] *Ibid.,* 54.
[127] *Ibid.,*58.
[128] *Ibid.*
[129] *Ibid.,*58-59. Generally speaking, we agree with this. However, this is not always the case. For instance, institutions can become objective realities imposed upon the same persons or generations that created them. What starts as a meaningful, comprehensible situation can evolve along the years to become an institution irreflectively and rutinarily accepted beyond any doubt by its own initiators. In this view, the loss of awareness of the flexibility and

however, "all this changes in the process of transmission to the new genera-
tion," which "had no part in shaping it."[130] "A world so regarded attains a
firmness in consciousness; it becomes real in an ever more massive way and
it can no longer be changed so readily."[131]For those who did not construct
this world but inherit it, "it becomes *the* world." That is why the world con-
structed by the parents becomes partially opaque, "like nature," for their chil-
dren.[132] So, institutions appear as "given, unalterable and self-evident."[133] "An
institutional world, then, is experienced as an objective reality" whose his-
tory "antedates the individual's birth and is not accessible to his biographical
recollection."[134] Institutions are "historical and objective facticities" that con-
front us "as an episode located within the objective history of society": they

contingency of institutions can emerge within the same generation that creates the institu-
tional order. Think, for instance, of the process of institutional foundation and consolidation
of a university. In a first moment, its founding fathers have a clear idea of its aims and goals
and they discuss and consciously agree to its fundamental norms. Some time later, however,
the university becomes a full-blown institution and they end up becoming subjected to the
very same regulations they created; that is, they start blindly accepting and following a set of
"given" rules whose birth and original goals they have "forgotten."

[130] *Ibid.,* 59.

[131] *Ibid.* Although Berger and Luckmann have a point here, this is not always the case. To
be sure, sometimes people do change institutions in whose construction they did not partici-
pate. Reformist and revolutionary movements usually contest the cultural meaning of pre-
acquired structures. In order to do this, they first have to understand (at least partially) the
institutions they did not created. Sometimes, the possibility of changing institutions is even
built into them. For example, the constitutions of some States incorporate amendments on
how to change the constitution. This implies that the congressmen who pomulgated the con-
stitution forsaw that, in the future, citizens might want to change it and stipulated the way
in which those changes should be made. This is interesting because what those congressmen
had is an empty anticipation: they predetermined in general the form in which those changes
shall be made but not their specific content. They believed that there will be changes, but did
not know exactly which ones. Consequently, not always institutions become opaque to those
who inherited them. And, as we showed in the footnote 129, they can also become obscure
for the ones who started them.

[132] *Ibid.* This is one of the many thoughful examples that can be found in *The Social Con-
struction of Reality.* Indeed, children tend to see their parents' world as meaningless. But this
is just one particular case, which cannot account in full for the whole range of possible cases.
From a different angle, children can start by accepting the world of their parents as it is and
doing things the way they are done and end up anyway understanding the intrinsic mean-
ing and value of what they were told to do. They can make their own those behaviors once
acquired through habits and inherited traditions and get to understand their true meaning
and value. That is exactly what parents and educators do and (sometimes) accomplish. For
example, a child raised in a particular culture, religion, ideology, or the like, can learn, over
the years, to make sense of what he has been thaught. He might then consciously assume that
way of life and even want to pass it on to a new generation by becoming himself a father, an
educator, a priest or a political leader.

[133] *Ibid.*

[134] *Ibid.,* 60.

are out there as external, persistent realities that resist any attempt "to change or evade them."[135]

How come, being humanly produced realities, institutions end up being incomprehensible? Berger and Luckmann claim that this is so because institutions are objectivated products of human activity:

> The institutional world is objectivated human activity, and so is every single institution. In other words, despite the objectivity that marks the social world in human experience, it does not thereby acquire an ontological status apart from the human activity that produced it.[136]

The process of objectivation of human activity is, in turn, produced by a consciousness that retains part of our experience "as recognizable and memorable entities," which is then sedimented.[137] In addition to this kind of *subjective* sedimentation, operated by an individual consciousness, *intersubjective* sedimentation occurs "when several individuals share a common biography, experiences of which become incorporated in a common stock of knowledge."[138]Furthermore, intersubjective sedimentation turns into *social* sedimentation when it is objectivated in a sign system because then "the possibility of reiterated objectification of the shared experiences arises,"[139] which makes it "likely that these experiences will be transmitted from one generation to the next, and from one collectivity to another."[140]

With this objectivation into "an objectively available sign system," a transformation occurs in the sedimented experience. It acquires "a status of incipient anonymity" by being detached "from their original context of concrete individual biographies": it becomes "generally available to all who share, or may share in the future, the sign system in question."[141] In this way, experiences become easier to transmit.

Even if any sign system would do, usually the linguistic system is the decisive factor:

> Language objectivates the shared experiences and makes them available to all within the linguistic community, thus becoming both the basis and the instrument of the collective stock of knowledge. Furthermore, language provides the means for objectifying new experiences, allowing their incorporation into the

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[135] *Ibid.*
[136] *Ibid.,* 60-61.
[137] *Ibid.,* 67.
[138] *Ibid.*
[139] *Ibid.*
[140] *Ibid.,* 68.
[141] *Ibid.*

already existing stock of knowledge, and it is the most important means by which the objectivated and objectified sedimentations are transmitted in the tradition of the collectivity in question.[142]

As a consequence of its sedimentation, its designation and transmition in a linguistic system, experience becomes accessible for those who never had it, since linguistic designation "abstracts the experience from its individual biographical occurrences" and turns it into "an objective possibility for everyone."[143] This means that it becomes anonymous and a component part of the common stock of knowledge. Thus, through objectivation, experience "becomes an objective possibility for everyone"[144] that can be incorporated to a larger tradition; it can also be taught to new generations and even be diffused to collectivities totally different from the one in which this experience emergeged and was originally transmitted. "Language becomes the depository of a large aggregate of collective sedimentations, which can be acquired monothetically, that is, as cohesive wholes and without reconstructing their original process of formation" since "the actual origin of the sedimentations" becomes "unimportant."[145]

Summarizing, Berger and Luckmann's argument in the above-mentioned passages is that human action tends to become habitual through repetition. This means that it becomes typical and comprehensible for others. Once habitualities get crystallized, social institutions emerge and they are more stable and permanent than actions *per se*. Thus, institutions tend to be experienced as objective realities that exert coercion and control on the individuals, being practically unalterable.

When this process of objectification is retained in subjective consciousness, it tends to settle as stereotyped and its meaning is sedimented. In the cases in which this meaning is shared, it is intersubjectively sedimented. And in the cases in which it is objectivated in a sign system, it is socially sedimented. Generally speaking, language is the sign system used for that, since it makes the sedimented experience accessible to others and available for future generations in the form of anonymous types.

6. *Social Institutions as Taken-For-Granted Reifications in Burke Thomason: Advancing the Schutzian Tradition One Step Forward*

As seen in the previous section, Berger and Luckmann claim that institutions, when crystalized, are experienced as higher, transcendent realities

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[142] *Ibid.,* 68.
[143] *Ibid.*
[144] *Ibid.*
[145] *Ibid.,* 69.

endowed with an external, coercive power upon the individuals, who experience them as objectified human activities that can only be changed by those individuals who constructed them, for whom the institutional world is transparent and malleable. Now, this posses a problem. If human activity is objectified, how could it still be changed by us? If it is really objective, then it cannot be transformed by us; if we can modify it, then it is no longer objective in the strong sense of the term.

In our view, the point is not that institutions are objective but that they are *experienced* as objective because they have been denaturalized through oblivion. Nevertheless, it seems that Berger and Luckmann deal with this process not as if it were merely gnoseological but also ontological in nature. That is, sometimes they seem to imply that there is an actual process of objectivation going on instead of a simple change in the attitude in which we approach institutions.

The question is, thus, if something subjective (like human activity) can actually become objective. Or is it just that *we take it to be* objective? Further reflection is needed in order to better understand this. In this connection, Burke Thomason's views on institutions as improper reifications of human activity are especially relevant.

Although Thomason goes further than Berger and Luckmann, it is also true that he heavily draws upon their work. More precisely, he stresses the importance of two crucial claims from *The Social Construction of Reality*: (a) that institutions are "a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors," and (b) that they "control human conduct by setting up predefined patterns of conduct, which channel it in one direction as against the many other directions that would theoretically be possible."[146] Briefly, on this account, institutions are reciprocally organized, typified patterns of social relationships.

In Thomason's view, the aforesaid implies that "institutions work as controls for human behavior,[147] that is, they 'close' the world-openness of man, just to the extent that they take on an objective, independent, thing-like existence."[148] Hence, institutions are reifications that "provide ready-made channels or grooves for human conduct, i.e. unquestioned patterns which resolve quasi-automatically the 'problems of choice' that man would otherwise face."[149] Yet, one can even go further and say along with Berger and Pullberg that the "ultimate root" of the processes of reification of institutions "lie[s] in some fundamental terrors

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[146] Burke C. Thomason, *Making Sense of Reification,* 110, 105.

[147] This does not necessarily involve social constraint since institutions "are dependent only ultimately upon direct coercion." *Ibid.*, 102.

[148] *Ibid.*, 105.

[149] *Ibid.*, 106.

of human existence, notably the terror of chaos—which is then assuaged by the fabrication of the sort of firm order that only reifications can constitute."[150]

Institutions, then, are key for mastering everyday life. This is how it happens: "once we attribute to our institutions a kind of taken-for-granted facticity, our social world becomes a structure of 'dominations.' We are constrained and channelled by our own constructions."[151] Constructions, in turn, make it possible for us to establish routines.

> People live according to certain routines. These are bulit upon standarized typifications which are broadly accepted within the social collectivity. Such routines and typifications constitute effective institutional channels just in so far as they are left unquestioned and granted a certain thing-like autonomy. Without institutional channels, and without taken-for-granted reifications, the social world would be devoid of sustantive content.[152]

It follows that, in order for institutions to accomplish their specific goals, they have to be reified, *i.e.*, they must refer "to a certain attributed thing-like objectivity."[153] Generally speaking, reification is:

> a cognitive process whereby various aspects of experience come to acquire a kind of inappropriate ontological fixedness. Reification, in other words, involves 'thing-ification' (*Verdinglichung*): the attribution of 'facticity,' concreteness, authonomy, impersonality, objectivity, externality etc., to the 'things' that are reified. These attributions must be inappropriate. The things reified must *not* be the concrete, autonomous, inert facticities they are taken to be.[154]

People reify experienced objectivities whenever they ignore that the latter are constituted and therefore "dependent upon various subjective processes."[155] When this occurs, "people take the objectivity of their experience for granted."[156] In this sense, reification also implies a process of mys-

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[150] Peter Berger and Stanley Pullberg, "Reification and the Sociological Critique of Consciousness," *History and Theory* 4 (2), 1965: 207.

[151] Burke C. Thomason, *Making Sense of Reification*, 107.

[152] *Ibid.*

[153] *Ibid.*, 131. We can find a similar idea in Schutz and Luckmann, when they claim that institutionalization is a kind of solidification of the rules used "in the communicative processes of a we-relation [..., which] presupposes not only the process of intersubjective constitution of the signs, but moreover a socially more or less solidified ("institutionalized"), historically pregiven system of signs, a 'natural' language." Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life-World, Volume II* (London: Heinemann, 1989), 148.

[154] Burke C. Thomason, *Making Sense of Reification*, 88.

[155] *Ibid.*, 90. Also as a sociological construct "institution" can be a reification, unless it is "translated into social experience and intersubjective praxis." Laurie Spurling, *Phenomenology and the social world* (London, Henley and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 87.

[156] Burke C. Thomason, *Making Sense of Reification*, 90.

tification. This is expressly stated by Berger and Pullberg in a paper upon which Thomason heavily draws: "Institutions are reified by mystifying their true character as human objec-tivations and by defining them, again, as suprahuman facticities analogous to the facticities of nature."[157] Accordingly, "[t]he deviant from these institutionally defined courses of action may thus be perceived […] as one who offends against the very nature of 'things,' against the 'natural order' of the world or of his own being."[158]

Summing up Thomason's contributions to our problem, we can say that institutions are typified, unquestioned patterns of action which consist in organized, regularized, and stabilized social relationships. They, as it were, quasi-automatically resolve "the problem of choice" for people and make it possible for them to accomplish their specific goals and master their everyday life. Institutions are thus reifications that provide ready-made channels for human conduct. Reification, in turn, involves the attribution of facticity, concreteness, autonomy, impersonality, objectivity, externality and the like to a product of human action. Reified institutions are seen as "things"—which they are not.

Thus, reifications are inappropriate attributions or, as we may say, mystifications. The reified things are not concrete, autonomous, inert facticities; they are not the things they are taken to be. To reify something, then, means to ignore that experienced objectivities, such as institutions, are constituted by subjective processes.

In our opinion, Thomason's main contribution lies in having recognized, unlike Berger and Luckmann, that reification is an *improper* objectification that does not respect the nature of things. It is not that the subjective actually becomes objective. Rather, it is just that human activity can be improperly grasped as if it were a thing. Put otherwise, social institutions involve always a mystification of human activity.

7. *The (Neglected) Phenomenology of Social Institutions in Contemporary Social Theory: The Unnoticed Persistence of the Schutzian Tradition*

In spite of its overall criticism of social phenomenology,[159] contemporary social theory has been receptive to the Schutzian approach in the study of

[157] Peter Berger and Stanley Pullberg, "Reification and the Sociological Critique of Consciousness," 207.

[158] *Ibid*. This idea of the facticities of nature reminds one of Schutz's account of the "central myth" which governs "the ideas of a concrete group." Alfred Schutz, "Equality and the meaning structure of the social world," in *Collected Papers II. Studies in Social Theory* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), 245. This myth "belongs itself to the relative natural conception of the world which the in-group takes for granted and constitutes the grounds of its self-interpretation." (*Ibid.,* 262).

[159] Cf. Carlos Belvedere, *Problemas de fenomenología social.*

social institutions, particularly to the idea that the latter imply processes of sedimentation and reactivation of meaning.[160] This is especially evident in the work of the British thinker Anthony Giddens.

As we said, the phenomenological origins of institutionalization shall be found "in the process of sedimentation or habitualization which attends all experience."[161] This is clearly stated by Berger and Luckman, among many other phenomenologists. Their claim is that the process of objectivation of human activity is produced by a consciousness that retains part of our experience, which is then sedimented.[162]

As said, in addition to this kind of *subjective* sedimentation, operated by an individual consciousness, *intersubjective* sedimentation occurs when numerous individuals share a common biography and their experiences become incorporated in a common stock of knowledge.[163] Intersubjective sedimentation turns into *social* sedimentation when it is objectivated in a sign system because then "the possibility of reiterated objectification of the shared experiences arises,"[164] which makes it "likely that these experiences will be transmitted from one generation to the next, and from one collectivity to another."[165]

These ideas are partly found in Giddens, who is closer to the phenomenology of social institutions than to any other topic in phenomenological sociology. Inspired by the Schutzian approach, the British social theorist characterizes institutions as "practices which are deeply sedimented in time-space,"[166]

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[160] As seen along this paper, this idea plays a crucial role in the Schutzian phenomenology of social institutions. This have been also noted by other scholars—who, by the way, consider that Berger and Luckmann's account of the origins of institutionalization is "fully compatible with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach." Laurie Spurling, *Phenomenology and the social world*, 86. For instance, it has been said that "institution is the perpetual reactivation of the potential of that which precedes it: […] The generativity of the instituting always presupposes the encounter with a pregiven being, continually reinvested in the open network of instituted signification. It opens toward a sense that forms a sediment in us, but that also, as unfulfilled, always demands to be reworked […] It is time that, in weaving the thread and the articulation of the instituting and the instituted, allows for the re-taking-up (reprise) of the—our—concrete condition that forms the underlying layer of all openness toward the future. Thus, it turns out that institution functions as the intertwining of 'events that sediment in me a sense' (IP, 57)." Caterina Rea, "The Origin of Corporeal Ipseity: Between Lag and Institution," 190. "IP" stands for: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collège de France (1954–1955)*, ed. Dominique Darmaillacq, Claude Lefort, and Stephanie Menase, trans. Leonard Lawlor and Heath Massey (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010).

[161] Laurie Spurling, *Phenomenology and the social world*, 87.

[162] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality,* 67.

[163] *Ibid.*

[164] *Ibid.*

[165] *Ibid.,* 68.

[166] Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory. Action, structure and contradiction in social analysis* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 80.

becoming therefore "standardised modes of behaviour."[167] Concisely put, by institutions he means "structured social practices that have a broad spatial and temporal extension: that are structured in […] the *longue durée* of time, and which are followed or acknowledged by the majority of the members of a society."[168]

On Giddens's phenomenologically inspired account, thus, institutions are "regularised social practices" which "are constituted and reconstituted in the tie between the *durée* of the passing moment, and the *longue durée* of deeply sedimented time-space relations."[169] In this sense, they are "the most deeply layered practices."[170] Consequently, they can be analyzed "in terms of the historical duration of the practices they recursively organise and the spatial 'breadth' of those practices."[171] The process of constitution and reconstitution mentioned by Giddens involves not only sedimentation of meaning but—as we already implied—its retrieval. This is a major topic in Merleau-Ponty (as seen in Section 1) and in Berger and Luckman (as we have just expounded).

These concerns are also present in the work of one of the main French sociologists of our times, Pierre Bourdieu. In spite of being one of the toughest critics of phenomenological sociology, he echoes phenomenological lexis when he relates institutions to processes of meaning reactivation and incorporation and to an initial act of constitution, instauration or institution. In this respect, he seems to draw on Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of institution as *Stiftung*.[172]

Thus, in a way, Schutzian phenomenology of social institutions has been quite influential in the social sciences. Indeed, some of its concepts have been assimilated by other perspectives in contemporary social theory. In particular, the idea that institutions are deeply layered practices that result from processes of constitution and reconstitution, sedimentation, retrieval and reactivation of meaning has been widely accepted by current social thinkers.

Nonetheless, this influence poses at least one problem. Most contemporary social theorists have been critical of the philosophy of counsciosness.[173] Is it possible to borrow such an important aspect of the phenomenology of social institutions and, at the same time, to reject its grounding concepts?

[167] *Ibid.,* 96.
[168] *Ibid.,* 9.
[169] *Ibid.,* 110.
[170] Anthony Giddens, *Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 36.
[171] *Ibid.*
[172] Pierre Bourdie, *Le sense practique* (Paris: Minuit, 1980), 96.
[173] See Giddens, *Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory*, 8, 31, and *Central Problems in Social Theory,* 38, 40. See also Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique,* 71, 76, 97n8, 98.

More specifically, is it admissible to claim that institutions are the result of processes of meaning constitution, sedimentation, and the like, while denying the existence of a phenomenological consciousness, which is the one who produce those processes? Brief, can we talk about constitution without talking about consciousness?

In our view, these kinds of inconsistencies are a consequence of the eclecticism typical of contemporary social theorists such as Bourdieu and Giddens.[174] When ideas from different—sometimes even contradictory—social-theoretical traditions are put together without analyzing in detail their conceptual presuppositions, shortcomings are likely to occur. By contrast, as seen, the Schutzian perspective on social institutions is way more consistent.

On this particular topic, Berger and Luckmann provide the most extensive and reliable account. However, despite its overall consistence and coherence, their argument leaves an open question. Berger and Luckmann seem to imply that there are two different kinds of sedimentation, one which takes place in individual consciousness and another in the impersonal, collective stock of knowledge. The question is: can we use the same word for both processes? Our guess would be that these two different processes of sedimentation of knowledge—which actually do exist—should be the object of specific, detailed descriptions. We cannot provide them here. It is an open question we intend to explore in upcoming investigations.

Concluding Remarks: A Summary of the Main Contributions of Schutzian Phenomenology to the Study of Social Institutions

In this paper, we presented in some detail the main insights of Schutzian phenomenology on the study of social institutions. These contributions, we think, can help enriching the current social-theoretical discussion on the topic. To conclude, we will attempt to summarize and systematize them in four theses.

 (1) Social institutions are a kind of knowledge at hand determined by the prevalent systems of motivational relevances. More specifically, they are a kind of cultural pattern of group life to be interiorized by individuals and to be used by them in order to define their situation in the group and fulfill their personal interests. These patterns mainly consist of typifications and relevances that define objective meanings. Thus, they are not real entities but ideal

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[174] On eclecticism in contemporary social theory as a paradigm in general and in the work of Bourdieu in particular, see Carlos Belvedere, *El discurso del dualismo en la teoría social contemporánea*, 150.

relations, which consist in constructs of common-sense thinking that can only be apprehended by symbols. These symbols, however, represent real entities pertaining to the life-world that actually motivate our actions within it. They are a part of the social world naively accepted by us in the natural attitude.

(2) As typified patterns of meaning, social institutions produce a "closing" of the human world that channels human conduct and makes it possible for us to achieve our purposes at hand obtaining the intended results through pre-established procedures. The more institutionalized or standardized a behavior pattern is, the greater is the chance that a self-typifying behavior will bring about the state of affairs aimed at. Accordingly, social institutions are a part of the organized patterns of routines that allow us to master the problems of daily life without the need to define or redefine ordinary situations or to look for solutions anew each time we act.

(3) Social institutions are intersubjectively produced; nevertheless, once they exist, they tend to "harden" and solidify, thereby becoming—or, better said, acquiring the appearance of— "objectivities" that are deemed to have coercive power over human beings. Seen this way, social institutions are characterized by their exteriority and moral coercion. The individual *experiences* them as "objective" realities possessing a reality of their own, as if they were rock-solid, external and unalterable things.

(4) Social institutions are reifications. Reification is a cognitive process whereby experience comes to acquire an inappropriate ontological fixedness. The things reified must not be the kind of things they are taken to be. To reify something means to ignore that experienced obejctivities are constituted and therefore dependent upon subjective processes. This, in turn, involves a mystification, since it implies conceiving institutions as supra-human facticities, not as human objectivations. Reification, then, is an inappropriate attribution of a thing-like nature to a product of human activity. In this sense, we may finish this paper by saying that social institutions are typified patterns of human behavior perceived as natural things.

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