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Initially I would like to address the issue of the social and cultural dimensions in institution building and institutional reform in a somewhat indirect way, namely reflecting upon the importance of these two dimensions in the study of political institutions.

I think this is legitimate, because if it is true that institution building and reforming are very complex processes in which a variety of factors and actors play their role, it is also undeniable that among these factors a relevant place is taken by the ideas, models, patterns designed by political scientists and other professional scholars like administrative scientists or constitutional lawyers.

Now, it is well known that for the sake of scientific or technical specialization, western political science – not to speak about administrative sciences or constitutional law – mostly focuses on institutions as such, in other words on what I would define their mechanical appearance.

Consciously or unconsciously, they tend to disentangle institutions from their own traditional ligatures, historical ways of thinking, societal arrangements, developmental processes, geo-economic contexts.

But when neglecting or downgrading in their analysis the social and cultural dimensions, such forgetful scholars happen to discard what actually explains the very roots and the actual sense of any institution. Institutions are a product of history; they incorporate values, cultural experiences and social processes that are unique. There is no way to really understand and elucidate the political institutions of a

country, their nature and working, if not through a deep understanding of so many different things; religion and economy, art and language, territory and meteorology, the railways network and the administrative structure, even etiquette and gastronomy.

Ignorance of this is what flaws, for instance, much comparative political science too. Comparative scholars usually analyse institutions carrying the same name – say “parliaments” or “health care systems” or “political parties”. The more refined among them do take stock of some social and cultural factors. But only rarely do their analytic efforts lead to reliable findings, exactly because controlling for so many variables in the comparison is a terribly complicated exercise.

As a consequence comparative political science often produce rather fragile results – with an aggravating circumstance: that many cross-national studies (but this is true of non comparative studies as well) end up by drawing “models”. And these models may not have normative purposes but do have normative effects: they suggest connections, design procedures, inspire or prescribe institutional policies. Put before the practitioner, they take the appearance of solutions to problems.

In fact, they represent the set of ‘scientific tools’, the expertise that normally accompany and support institution building and institutional reform processes.

But when these tools are the product of the sort of process I have just described (that is a process of abstraction from those cultural and social factors that gave birth to a certain institution, kept it alive and account for its change), then these tools are if not doomed, at least likely to fail.

The further point to consider is that these models that pay so little attention to the cultural and social dimensions, to the uniqueness of the historical developments, easily take the shape of universal patterns and as such are suitable to be accommodated into doctrines, which in their turn are bound to become fashions.

March and Olsen in their book *Rediscovering institutions* of about fifteen years ago maintained that institutional doctrines are appearing in cycles, one doctrine replacing the other often without inherent reasons.

It should be added and emphasised that such doctrines, such universal gospels, cyclically preached and denied, can be generated and accepted only thanks to a poor assessment of the cultural and social factors in which institutions are embedded, of the history that produced them.

In the field of administrative sciences we had recently a splendid example of this. As you probably know, an administrative doctrine has been diffused over the past fifteen years under the conventional name of New Public Management. NPM has been elaborated by outstanding scholars, supported by influential international agencies, disseminated by a host of active consultants. There is much

to learn from this doctrine, and much of it has been usefully put to work.

But it also correct to point out – as many did – that there are clear Anglo-Saxon origins of NPM and that NPM is the creature of that culture and its history. Many practitioners state that problems in developing countries are completely different from those that NPM was meant to solve. This may or may not be true.

What is certain is that the solutions NPM offers are deeply rooted in societies accustomed to an utilitarian way of reasoning, societies which stress values like competition, which have developed a market culture, where public and private sectors are endowed with economic and human resources that can plausibly compete one against the other. Why, with which purpose and with what sort of impact should that doctrine apply to countries with different features, with a different social and cultural constitution?

But – it could be objected – no administrative paradigm can do much harm; and this is a reasonable statement. Which could not be repeated however for the case of the nation state model, for instance. This model – a product of European engineering – as the historian Lucien Febvre once put it – has been exported and enforced in very many parts of the world, especially during the colonial era. It is a governmental technology about which many have been doubtful in the past, that – in my opinion – is today obsolete, and yet was sold and it is still selling with

devastating effects, to societies that need different technologies: newer, more appropriate, customised.

A similar discourse could be made about democracy, a much debated matter yesterday afternoon. You and I, Mr. Chairman, coming from the same continent – which has now become a Union – may plausibly assume that we share a common opinion about what democratic institutions are. But I am not sure that our countries and their people do. The fact is that in the years when Britain had its Magna Carta, Italy had its municipal renaissance. And that still makes a difference in the way the two countries practise democracy in these days.

What should be said then about democracy in India or Argentina?

Let me be clear about the fact that I am not pleading for an extreme version of the path dependency theory. I am not stating, in other terms, that all sound institutions and institutional reforms are or must be the outcome of a culture and of a society closed up in themselves, considering solely their own history and – so to say – revolving around it, with no vision for change, no capacity to learn from others – as if their historical path was the tyrannical master of their future.

But I do want to insist on the fact that the social and cultural dimensions are the masters of institutional change and not vice versa.

Now since history has produced diversity, and does not cease producing – even in the globalised era – a vast array of developmental processes, there are no ready made institutional recipes to be applied universally.

Ethnocentrism in institution building is not only culturally superseded, but practically inefficient; countries engaged in institutional reforms can learn from others only in a process of free exchange, moulded on the pattern of the free trading. I believe this was a point made by His Highness the Emir in his inaugural speech and I could not agree more.

But the case must be taken further. A sound scepticism before any already experienced institutional model and about all received ideas in the field of political science must be awoken and assist institutional building processes.

I very much appreciated the stress laid by the key note speaker of this forum – the honourable baroness Symons, on the rule of law, on equality of citizens, on the guarantee of their individual legal rights. Well, this set of institutions is usually associated with parliamentary governments, with large political participation; but let me recall that the most sophisticated, punctilious system of guarantees for the citizens against the abuses of the public administration was set up, at the end of the nineteenth century, in a country that had very feeble parliamentary institutions: Prussia. The German Rechtsstaat was joined by what is called a Scheinparlamentarismus, an only apparent parliamentary system.

Again, I am obviously not arguing against the parliamentary system. My point is that history provides us with many examples of institutional arrangements that run counter to the dogmas of political science or constitutional law, facts that according to those dogmas should not even have happened. Still they did; and the secret of their efficiency was and is in the specific social and cultural circumstances of a country, of that one single country. In the case of nineteenth century Prussia, these circumstances were an enlightened monarchy, the presence of different religious confessions, the fact that the entire population was literate, the excellency of the legal thought in that country. Circumstances that will never again reproduce themselves.

The truth is that institutions hardly make sense out of the context where they have been developed. This should always be kept in mind whenever institutions are imported. Institutional transfer is a possible, even desirable process, but with a caveat: that every transferred institution will give outcomes different from those it used to produce in the country where it was generated. Local social and cultural factors will bend it, mould it; if not failure, hybridisation inevitably results.

A model of a health care system conceived of in a country with a cultural tradition impregnated with liberal individualism will work differently in a country with a Confucian tradition.

It should sound obvious; unfortunately it is much less so. In any case it is meant here as a modest reminder of the importance of the social and cultural dimensions in institution building, in institutional reform; a reminder I would like to couple with this last one: namely that building institutions is by no means an exercise of political science – it is an exercise of political wisdom.