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Institutional social engagement

Abstract I am referring to social engagement as a value-based choice to actively intervene in social reality in order to modify existing collective identities and social practices with the goal of realizing the public good. The very term 'engagement', necessarily involves the starting awareness of a social deficit or flaw and presupposes a critical attitude towards social reality. In this article, I will attempt to provide arguments in favour of the thesis about the possibility (and, later, necessity) of institutional engagement, critical action and even institutional protest, basing this view on the thesis that institutions are fundamentally collective or social agents whose actions must be guided by ethical and epistemic virtues.

Keywords: institutions, social engagement, collective agents, institutional virtues, institutional research, decision-making process

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The term 'social engagement' has a very complex normative or value-based dimension. In fact, it does not refer to mere involvement or agency directed towards a neutral social goal, but the meaning of the term is, on a value basis, strongly related to the common good as the motive and aim of action. It is important to note that the common good can be understood in various ways, but it is crucial that the term implies a form of commitment focused on a public good that we deem worthy of special effort. I am, therefore, fond of the view that the term refers to a value-based choice to actively intervene in social reality in order to modify (up to a certain degree or whole) existing collective identities and social practices with the goal of acquiring the public good. Consequently, the very term 'engagement', necessarily involves the starting awareness of a social deficit or flaw and presupposes a critical attitude towards social reality.

Institutions are unlikely to be perceived as an area of social engagement, action and least of all protest. On the contrary, they are usually envisioned as a tool of the *status quo*, the guardians of the existing collective imaginary, identities and social practices. The system's institutions are consequently considered a natural target of various forms of social engagement due to them prevalently being perceived as conservative and conformist fortifications of the privileged. Social engagement has, almost by definition, been placed primarily into the space of the non-institutional or the alternative. In contrast to the above-mentioned stereotype that is shared by many critically thinking individuals, I will attempt to argue in favour of the thesis about the possibility of institutional engagement, critical action and even institutional protest. This does not mean that I am unaware of the fact that

institutions often deserve to be the target of social engagement. However, such a fact only accentuates the drawbacks of the prevailing institutional (non) culture in which institutions happen to be the causes of deficit. The aforementioned fact about institutional deficits does not rule out the possibility of institutional activity in the domain of social engagement.

430 I have initially based my view of the possibility (and, later, necessity) of institutional engagement on the thesis that institutions are fundamentally collective or social agents whose actions must be guided by the ideas of ethical and epistemic virtues and responsibilities in a way that is not substantially different from the activity of individual agents. If individuals and groups can conduct social engagement on the basis of ethical and epistemic responsibility, then it must be an equally possible feat for structured social agents such as institutions. Institutions fulfil their political/ethical and epistemic task only if their actions are congruent with the freedom and equality of each individual and if their decisions are made in a way that ensures epistemic quality by the means of their correctness, truthfulness or ability to resolve the problems of the majority of citizens. This view of institutions as collective agents who base their purpose on justice and truthfulness is derived from the philosophical theory of justice supported by the likes of John Rawls (Rawls 1999) who developed elaborate theories concerning the normative principles of justice that ought to govern social institutions, and the social epistemology of Alvin Goldman (Goldman 1999, 2010) who claims that social entities such as institutions need to comply to the epistemic feature of truth-conductiveness. The social engagement of institutions is consequently comprised of autonomous and responsible actions aimed at improving the social reality in which there is an established ethical/political or epistemic deficit. In other words, this means that not every occurrence of investing special effort on the basis of values (defined by ideological bias) can be considered social engagement. Sometimes it is simply the usage of institutional power in order to generate a deficit.

Also, it is worthy to point out that not every action can be considered social engagement. Just like individuals, institutions ought to derive the purpose of social engagement from the fact that additional effort is needed to improve a critical element of social reality. It could be said that institutions are obliged to always act in the best manner they possibly can, so additional efforts are not indicators of engagement, but rather of a well-functioning (as opposed to non-functioning) institution. I could agree with the statement that desirable action can be considered synonymous with continuous social engagement. However, given the absence of this regulatory ideal in the real world, one should ascribe additional value to any occasional stronger engagement targeted at the elimination of a clear, present and serious deficit.

However, although I consider institutional engagement possible, it is still methodologically different from the engagement of individuals or non-institutional groups. Institutions intrinsically consist of procedures, regulations which determine the manner in which the institution operates, a clearly defined structure (often a hierarchy) and a certain amount of power over a larger or smaller group of people. When defending the idea of institutional engagement, I by no means intend to imply that institutions ought to abandon their structures and procedures, or even power relations. Namely, structured institutional power is not necessary a vicious social fact, but can instead be referred to in terms of its positive and negative uses, as clearly explicated by Miranda Fricker (Fricker 2007). By relinquishing their key characteristics institutions would cease to be institutions and instead become a different social construct. The aforementioned procedures, organization and structured power ought to serve as a dam preventing arbitrary, reckless, thoughtless, uncontrolled and partial changes that could be detrimental to society. Institutional engagement is based on mobilising its structural power to raise awareness of a prevalent and dangerous deficit and on striving to regulate the procedure so that the deficit is systematically eliminated as a contribution to the common good. Institutions which implement this sort of conduct in societies marked by institutional neglect and ignorance towards democratic and intellectual virtues are, consequently and by definition, acting in the sphere of institutional engagement, institutional criticism and even protests.

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Finally, I believe that institutional commitment is not only possible, but rather necessary for any democratic society. The common good cannot rest solely on non-institutional engagement which, however welcome and important, simply cannot be sufficiently effective. The methodology of non-institutional activity has its own logic and its role is precious and irreplaceable in democratic societies, but it is an illusion to think that they could in any way sufficiently contribute to the rectification of dangerous deficits and the establishment of a public good. That is why it is important not to relinquish hope in the institution as a critical and active collective agent.

Institutional research, smart institutional decision making and a proper institutional engagement

The most common causes of social deficits can be found at the junction of egoistic and altruistic behaviour, as well as of general and particular interests. To understand what I mean, attempt to recall the famous prisoner's dilemma. Two people, who we may name Robby and Bobby, are detained in two separate prison cells after committing a relatively mild crime. A police officer talks to each of them separately in a way that encourages them to confess to committing the crime, despite the obvious lack of evidence. In

order to acquire their confessions, the officer warns them that in the case that the other prisoner confesses, the one that does not will become subject to both penalties. In these circumstances Robby is considering several potential scenarios: (i) if he confesses, but Bobby does not, he will be released, and Bobby will get 5 years in prison; (ii) if he does not confess yet Bobby does, he will get 5 years, and Bobby will be free to walk out of prison; (iii) if both confess, they will both be given a yearlong penalty; (iv) if neither of them confess, the police only have sufficient evidence for them to remain in custody for six months. Bobby undergoes the same thought process. In short, both separately come to the conclusion: if they confess they can either be penalized for a year or go home, and if they do not confess they can be penalized for either 5 years or 6 months. Confessing clearly seems like a rational choice to both Robby and Bobby, separated by their respective prison cells. The risk of spending a long time in prison is far smaller. If both choose to do what they deem rational, both will confess and be imprisoned for a year. What is the point of this story? The prisoner's dilemma confronts us with the realisation that everyone will, regardless of what others may do, feel inclined to make a decision that protects their own interest (in this case, to confess) rather than choose to protect others (in this case, to remain silent). However, if they had both thought about the other – and had remained silent – they would both only be imprisoned for six months, which is a better outcome than the one acquired by catering only to their self-interest. This dilemma clearly demonstrates a situation in which rational selfish choice leads to an outcome worse than the alternative: it would evidently be better for all of us to take care of others who are affected by our actions. However, we fail to do so. We can only attempt to imagine how this would manifest in complex social situations involving more than two agents who do not know what others will do and who aim to protect their own interests. One can easily imagine how this situation could result in different forms of social deficits – human rights violations, discrimination, corruption and other forms of cheating.

My second favourite example is the free rider problem. If each of us was focused on working in the direction of the public good, we would all benefit from the common action. However, an individual can think that his contribution to the public good is too irrelevant for anyone – especially for him – to notice. Therefore, he concludes that he may choose not to contribute his share or, in other words, to become a free rider who thrives on the beneficial actions of others. The key dilemma for the rest, or the majority, is to decide whether to keep defending the public good, and therefore consciously insure benefits to free riders (cheaters), or to become free riders and, in the long run, ruin the public good. This example proves to be incredibly lucid in accentuating the dilemma of the individual faced with the protection of the common good.

Each institution, including the scientific institutions whose internal structure I am best familiar with, must harmonize their activities with this tension between the public and the private, the individualized and the general, the egoistic and the altruistic. Every scientist is naturally opposed to anyone else telling him what to examine, how to spend funds provided by the project and who to work with. He is likely to be particularly wary of anyone attempting to measure his effectiveness or the extent of his success in relation to other colleagues. However, each institution naturally strives to encourage efficiency in order to maintain its reputation or acquire money (or both), and to control and reduce the improper usage of resources. While the scientist is likely to perceive any form of restriction as a threat, the institution will see any resistance as subversion. Similarly, each higher education institution aims to acquire as much funds as possible with the minimum expenditure of time, effort and resources. In case the funds cannot be sourced from the state budget, which would be ideal, the simplest alternative is found in charging students higher tuition fees. Students are, clearly, opposed to any increase in tuition fees. Both cases cause deficits. In the first case there is an epistemic deficit: scientists will attempt to meet the institutional requirements by corrupting the very system that limited their private (and egoistically rational) interest. They may resort to modifying scientific results in order to appeal to sponsors, developing scientific and publishing lobbies or taking part in various forms of research misconduct such as plagiarism, fabrication, falsification and the like. In the second case, there is a democratic deficit which prevents the access of young people of poorer socio-economic status to higher education.

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What does institutional engagement consist of in such cases? Of course, it is based on making additional efforts to raise awareness and eliminate deficits. It lies in the struggle to develop ethical codes which sanction misconduct in scientific research and in consciously reducing tuition fees. However, I think that the purpose of true and inherent institutional engagement lies in something deeper – in developing truth-conductive, democratic and egalitarian institutional mechanisms which could systematically recognize, detect, prevent and abolish such deficits. Or, in other words, it lies in developing institutional intelligence by introducing smart decision-making policies. The prisoner's dilemma and the free rider problem, just like the aforementioned examples, serve to accentuate the extreme complexity of the institutional decision-making process. The logic of collective action and social choice is extremely complex because decisions made in real world circumstances are unavoidably influenced by (i) risk and extreme uncertainty, (ii) permanent and intrinsic conflict between individual interests/preferences/benefits and institutional interests/preferences/benefits, (iii) the fact that participants' rational choices usually appeal to their own particular interests/preferences/benefits.

In short, real institutional engagement does not lie in correcting the symptoms, but in understanding and preventing the deficit. Although we recognize the intuitive capacities of talented and experienced decision makers, the relationship between intuitive and informed decision-making is not a question of dispute. Informed and smart decision-making must be based on institutional research, data collection and analysis in order to be able to produce good decisions. Institutional research needs to focus on exploring, understanding and explaining the institution to the institution itself with the intention of creating public good. The adoption of uninformed decisions is a fundamental deficit of our institutional culture because such decisions facilitate attempts to corrupt the system. Institutional research and evidence based decision-making are thus the key tools of institutional engagement.

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Allow me to end with an example. In our higher education institutions, decisions to introduce or alter tuition fees are generally made on the basis of reduced state funding or the fact that other countries (even those with the most developed higher education, such as Great Britain and the US) have high tuition fees. It is claimed that high quality requires high fees. This is not an entirely unconvincing argument and my point is not to state that each institution should fight for free education and oppose academic capitalism. I would like to stress that institutions ought to prove whether academic capitalism is, in relation to their own causes, an ethically, politically and epistemically bad decision. In other words, this decision must be made on the basis of extensive institutional research examining the real cost of education within various scientific fields and education cycles, the average length of study, the income, revenues and expenses of institutions, the extent to which the costs are covered by the state budget, the structure of the institution's own income, the possible expenses or a way of streamlining that would not detract from the presently achieved quality, the GDP of relevant countries and planned projections of its growth/decline, the social structure of potential students, the existence of a scheme which provides scholarships and credits or other forms of financial aid, the likelihood of employment and loan repayment, the strategic objectives related to the purpose of higher education, the consequences that changes within the educational system pose for society as a whole, but also the societal requirement for certain employee profiles and a myriad of other relevant elements.

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Institucionalna društvena angažovanost

Apstrakt

Upućujem na društvenu angažovanost kao na vrednosno zasnovan izbor da se aktivno interveniše u društvenu zbilju, kako bi se preinačili postojeći kolektivni identiteti i društvene prakse, a s ciljem ostvarivanja javnog dobra. Sam pojam 'angažman' nužno uključuje početnu svest o društvenom deficitu ili manji, te pretpostavlja kritički stav spram društvene stvarnosti. U ovom tekstu pokušaću da iznesem argumente u prilog tezi o mogućem (vremenom, i nužnom) institucionalnom angažmanu, kritičkoj akciji, pa čak i institucionalnom protestu, zasni-vajući ovo stanovište na tezi da su institucije fundamentalno kolektivni ili društveni agenti čijim akcijama nužno rukovode etičke i epistemičke vrednosti.

Ključne reči: institucije, društveni angažman, kolektivni agenti, institucionalne vrednosti, institucionalno istraživanje, proces donošenja odluka