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The Interpretation of Ownership: Insights from Original Institutional Economics, Pragmatist Social Psychology and Psychoanalysis

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Abstract

In this work we analyse the main interpretations of ownership in Original Institutional Economics (OIE) and their links with pragmatist psychology and psychoanalysis.

We consider Thorstein Veblen's notion of ownership as a relation of possession of persons, and John R. Commons's distinction between "corporeal" and "intangible" property, that marks the shift from a material possession of goods and arbitrary power over the workers to the development of human faculties in a more participatory environment. For space reasons we do not address other contributions developed both by the OIE and by the New Institutional Economics.

We then consider a number of contributions of pragmatist social psychology and psychoanalysis that, although not dealing directly with the notion of ownership, can cast light not only on the private and "material" aspects of ownership but also on its collective and "relational aspects".

The reason why we consider it useful to address different perspectives is that, as observed by the famous sociologist Karl Mannheim (1952), a landscape can be seen only from a determined perspective and without perspective there is no landscape. Hence, observing a landscape (or phenomenon) from different angles (or disciplines) can help to acquire a much clearer insight into the features of the various perspectives. And this is one of the main advantage of a pluralist approach to the study of economic and social phenomena, also aimed at overcoming the fragmentation so often present in social sciences. In this light, the interpretative theories that we address, however different in many respects, present notable complementarities, in the sense that the aspects more overlooked by some are more completely considered by the others. In our work, these different but complementary notions of ownership can help illuminate the manifold aspects of human relations, also with a view to provide a more tailored policy action for the solution of their more problematic aspects.

Keywords:

Original Institutional Economics, Pragmatist Social Psychology, Psychoanalysis, Social Valuing, Political Economy

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A12; A13; B52

¹ The usual disclaimer applies.

1. Veblen's Concept of Ownership

Thorstein Veblen, in his article "The Beginnings of Ownership", stresses the importance of psychological factors in the rising of the institution of ownership. He notes that in any discussion on the criteria for the distribution of wealth, the focus should be directed to social or collective production rather than to individual and isolated production. As he puts it,

This natural-rights theory of property makes the creative effort of an isolated, self-sufficing individual the basis of ownership vested in him. In so doing it overlooks the fact that there is no isolated, self-sufficing individual. All production, in fact, is a production in and by the help of community, and all wealth is such only in society. (Veblen, 1934 [1898]: 33)

Veblen's explicit acknowledgment of the social character of ownership allows him to explain how this institution had evolved out of primitive ages. This entails enquiring into the psychological orientations which underlie the relations of the primitive populations with their objects in connections to the social organization,

What is of interest for the present purpose is not whether we, with our preconceptions, would look upon the relation of the primitive savage or barbarian to his slight personal effects as a relation of ownership, but whether that is his own apprehension of the matter....like all questions of the derivation of institutions, it is essentially a question of folk-psychology, not of mechanical fact; and when, so conceived, must be answered in the negative. (Veblen, *ibidem*: 35, 36)

As a matter of fact, it is important to realize that ownership, as we understand it, is a relatively recent concept. In a very early stage, for instance, all the objects at disposal of a person cannot be conceived "to belong" to him in any familiar-to-us sense of the word. As well expressed by Veblen, the primitive man identifies himself with the objects, in that he attributes to them anthropomorphic qualities and so considers them as a part of his personality. Hence,

[For]....The unsophisticated man, whether savage or civilised....All obvious manifestations of force are apprehended as expressions of conation—effort put forth for a purpose by some agency similar to the human will...The objects and facts that fall within the quasi-personal fringe figure in the habits of thought of the savage as personal to him in a vital sense. They are not a congeries of things to which he stands in an economic relation and to which he has an equitable, legal claim. These articles are conceived to be his in much the same sense as his hands and feet are his, or his pulse-beat, or his digestion, or the heat of his body, or the motions of his limbs or brain. (Veblen, *ibidem*: 36, 37)

The absence in the habits of thought of primitive people of the concept of the individual ownership does not imply, as it might appear at first glance, that they had, for the things held on a common basis, a corresponding concept of collective ownership. In fact, the concept of collective ownership requires a pre-existing concept of individual ownership,

"Ownership is an accredited discretionary power over an object on the ground of a conventional claim; it implies that the owner is a personal agent who takes thought for the disposal of the object owned. A personal agent is an individual, and it is only by an eventual refinement—of the nature of a legal fiction—that any group of men is conceived to exercise a corporate discretion over the object. (Veblen, *ibidem*: 39)

In this meaning, ownership is not a static or "absolute" concept existing beyond and apart from the social experiences of the subjects involved, but it is an evolutionary concept that evolves along with the concept of "personal agent" — indeed, as we will see shortly, it constitutes the very expression of individual rights and prerogatives — and, therefore, is acquired through a long process of learning and habituation.

But, if ownership constitutes a social and cultural phenomenon, there arises the intriguing question: what social factors have contributed to its emergence?

Veblen identifies as the main factor driving ancient societies towards a structure of ownership the passage from peaceable to predatory habits of life, which express themselves in exploitation, coercion and seizure. These predatory habits have asserted themselves mainly through seizing durable goods and persons as a result of fights between rival societies. Ownership acquired through such predatory activities constitutes the basis of the invidious distinctions of wealth and status and of ceremonial institutions associated with them.

In this respect, the relevant element of ownership is not the material aspect linked to the possession of goods but the collective element related to the social distinctions made possible through such possession. In his account, Veblen is able to identify the links between acquisitive social institutions and patriarchal family, on the one side; and the importance for social status of seizing goods and, even more, persons, on the other. The common roots of these institutions lie in a predatory attitude typical of war-oriented communities, in which the social status is directly connected to fighting ability. All these connections are vividly expressed by Veblen,

When the practice [of seizing persons and especially women] hardens into custom, the captor comes to exercise a customary right to exclusive use and abuse over the women he has seized; and this customary right of use and abuse over an object which is obviously not an organic part of his person constitutes the relation of ownership, as naïvely apprehended....The result is a new form of marriage, in which the man is master. This ownership-marriage seems to be the origin both of private property and of the patriarchal household. Both of these great institutions are, accordingly, of an emulative origin. (Veblen, *ibidem*: 47, 48)

Thus, the institution of ownership originated in a relation of power and dominion over persons involving both social and family levels. In this regard, the possession of goods is a derivative of the possession of persons and acquires social importance as far as it is able to convey the invidious distinctions based upon the possession of persons. As a consequence, it happens that,

When the habit of looking upon and claiming the persons identified with my invidious interest, or subservient to me, as "mine" has become an accepted and integral part of men's habits of thought, it becomes a relatively easy matter to extend this newly achieved concept of ownership to the products of labor performed by the persons so held in ownership....The appropriation and accumulation of consumable goods could scarcely have come into vogue as a direct outgrowth of the primitive horde-communism, but it comes in as an easy and unobtrusive consequence of the ownership of persons. (Veblen, *ibidem*: 48, 49)

Veblen's fascinating reconstruction of the emergence of the institution of ownership casts a deeper light on its links with and emulative and "conspicuous" possession of goods and persons, on the one side, and with patriarchal family, on the other. It also cast light on the predatory aspects of capitalism (addressed in particular in Veblen 1904) and its relations of wage-slavery (see also later). As we will see in the paragraph 4, such theory has interesting parallels with a number of psychoanalytic concepts.

The links with Veblen's theory of instincts

It can be interesting to analyse how these predatory aspects are linked to Veblen's theory of instincts (or propensities). In his book, *The Instinct of Workmanship and the State of the Industrial Arts* (1914), he examines the role of two fundamental instincts (or propensities), "workmanship" and "parental bent", in economic and social development. Both instincts are intended in a broad sense, "workmanship" meaning not only technical abilities but the whole of manual and intellectual activities, and "parental bent" meaning an inclination to look after the common good that extends beyond the sphere of the family alone.

In Veblen's analysis, these instincts tend, under ideal circumstances, to strengthen one another. This constitutes an important insight confirmed by studies in psychology and psychoanalysis, which stress the need for the person to enhance his or her intellectual, social, and emotional potential through the construction of adequate interpersonal relations.

These instincts are likely to prevail in a situation where other instincts that can act at cross-purposes to them have little social grounds to assert themselves. Veblen seems to suppose that the first stage of human life was of this kind but that, since then, a number of disturbing factors — mainly related, as we have just seen, to invidious distinctions of wealth and status ingrained in a notion of ownership — gained strength with the emergence of capitalism. By anticipating a bit the later discussion, it can be interesting to note that there are various parallels between Veblen's and Sigmund Freud's theory of instincts. These issues have also been addressed by Almeida (2015), who tends to consider Freud's principle of pleasure at odds with Veblen's theory of instincts. We agree with this, but would also note that one important reason why Freud remained

attached to a "biological" concept of instinct resides in his purpose of underlining the role of psychosexuality in human psychology. On that account, Freud has always underscored the role of feelings, interpersonal relations and cultural factors in driving individual behaviour, providing important contributions in which he stresses that libidinal relations are the necessary factor for the existence of society. In this regard, he tends to employ the term *eros* or *libido* as a synonymous with love. With this qualification, Freud's first theory of instincts, based on two main instincts (or drives), sexuality (or libido), and ego-instinct (or self-preservation), has, despite of course various differences, interesting parallels with Veblen's instincts of parental bent and workmanship.

Such parallels are even more striking if we consider the later development of psychoanalysis (addressed in paragraph 4) that stress the need of persons to establish sound interpersonal relations.

Another central aspect, which renders Veblen's theory very synergic with pragmatist psychology and psychoanalysis, is the insight that instincts constitute multifarious entities expressing the complex interplay between the biological, affective and intellective aspects of personality. This appears from the following passage,

The distinctive feature by the mark of which any given instinct is identified is to be found in the particular character of the purpose to which it drives. "Instinct", as contra-distinguished from tropismatic action, involves consciousness and adaptation to an end aimed at....The ends of life, then, the purposes to be achieved, are assigned by man's instinctive proclivities; but the ways and means of accomplishing those things which the instinctive proclivities so make worth while are a matter of intelligence....The higher the degree of intelligence and the larger the available body of knowledge current in any given community, the more extensive and elaborate will be the logic of ways and means interposed between these impulses and their realisation, and the more multifarious and complicated will be the apparatus of expedients and resources employed to compass those ends that are instinctively worthwhile....all instinctive action is intelligent in some degree. This is what marks it off from the tropism and takes it out of the category of automatism. Hence all instinctive action is teleological. It involves holding to a purpose. (Veblen, 1914: 4, 5-6, 6, 31).

2. Commons's Theory of Ownership

As we have seen, in Veblen's analysis ownership is conceived to be the institutional sanction of a relation of dominion over persons. But, in Commons's theory, the whole set of our opportunities can be considered, in a very pregnant way, as "belonging" to us. Thus, by considering these aspects, the concept of ownership acquires manifold meanings, as it embraces the whole range of limits and opportunities of individual action within a social context. Commons's institutional and historical approach illustrates, through the analysis of the orientation of legislation and justice courts' decisions, the evolution of concept of ownership: from a concept, stressed by Veblen, of exclusive disposal of goods and persons, to one of reciprocal rights, duties and opportunities. The

latter forms are associated with the emergence of new economic structures and social classes, in which the immaterial and intangible elements constituted by the contractual obligations represent the main basis of ownership. This does not imply that power and dominion over persons has disappeared but that it may assume more subtle and indirect ways, for instance in the form of unfair contracts. In Commons words,

Thus it is that 'corporeal property', in the original meaning of the term, has disappeared, or, rather, has been relegated to what may be described as the "internal" economy of a going concern or a household in the various processes of producing and consuming physical objects, according to what the economists call their "use-value." And, instead of the use-value of corporeal property, the courts are concerned with its exchange-value....In the course of time this exchange-value has come to be known as "intangible property," that is, the kind of property whose value depends upon the right of access to a commodity market, a labor market, a money market, and so on. (Commons, 1924:18-19)

It can be interesting to look into the concept of liberty employed by Commons in its connection to the concept of ownership. Commons identifies two concepts of liberty, denoted as liberty and freedom. The former — liberty — indicates only the absence of duties, whereas the latter — freedom — denotes a set of concrete rights and prerogatives associated with the emergence of new social classes and the corresponding importance of the immaterial expressions of ownership. As Commons explains,

Liberty, as such, is only the negative of duty, the absence of restraint or compulsion. But "freedom" is positive....The freedom of the ex-slave was not only that empty immunity from legal subjection to his master provided for in the Thirteenth Amendment of Emancipation from slavery, but also the participation in citizenship provided in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. (Commons, 1924:118-119)

In the analysis of these changes, it seems interesting to observe that this evolution is not limited to the passage from a material to an immaterial concept of ownership but continually transforms and extends the very definition of these concepts in a complex interaction with the economic and social structures. In this regard, Commons shows how the evolution of the concept of ownership has accompanied the rise of capitalism and the new social classes associated with it, and how these classes have addressed the problem of devising an adequate system of norms and institutions in order to allow their unfolding in the economic and social arena.

For instance, as regards the worker, there has been an evolution of the concept of the "ownership" of his person and his labour aimed at extending his right to participate in productive and collective life.

These changes can be traced back to the evolution of legislation and the decisions of justice courts, which together have shaped the development of labour right, unions rights and social legislation. This process is set out in the following passage,

Property is not a physical object but is the relationship which a person necessarily sets up between his personal abilities and the world about [and, as a consequence of the evolution towards an intangible notion of property]....Even organized labor achieves participation with the management in the protection of the job, just as the barons and the capitalists achieved participation with the King in the protection of property and business. A common law of labor is constructed by selecting the reasonable practices and rejecting the bad practices of labor, and by depriving both unions and management of arbitrary power over the job. (Commons, 1924: 156, 311-312).

Transactions, Institutions and Social Value

The interesting aspect of Commons's analysis of ownerships is that is intimately related to his institutional economics. In this regard, one of Commons's most important insights (in particular, 1924 and 1934) is that collective action constitutes a necessary element for an adequate performance of individual action. The dialectic and dynamic relations intervening between individual and collective action are effectively expressed in this passage:

Thus, the ultimate unit of activity, which correlates law, economics and ethics, must contain in itself the three principles of *conflict*, *dependence*, and *order*. This unit is a Transaction. A transaction, with its participants, is the smallest unit of institutional economics. (Commons, 1934: 58, 69)

As emerges from the passage, transactions are classified into three categories — Bargaining, Managerial and Rationing — according to the relationship established between the parties involved.

The first concerns the relation between individuals with equal rights — which does not necessarily correspond to equal economic power — for instance, between buyer and seller; the second regards the relations between people organized within an institution, for instance between a manager and his or her collaborators; and the third refers to the relations between the person and a kind of collective action where there is less direct involvement. This happens, in particular, with the policy action of Government and Parliament, but also with the collective action of the most important economic and social associations of society (for instance, political parties, unions, consumers associations).

These transactions are quite diverse according to the degree of direct intervention of collective action but, at the same time, are extremely intertwined. It is interesting to observe the complex, conflicting and evolutionary role that institutions assume in Commons's analysis, as expressed in the following passage,

Thus conflict, dependence, and order become the field of institutional economics, builded upon the principles of scarcity, efficiency, futurity, working rules, and

strategic factors; but correlated under the modern notions of collective action controlling, liberating, and expanding individual action. (Commons, 1934: 73, 92)

It is interesting to note that (i) what happens in these relations is reflected in the structure of ownership and determines how economic and political power is distributed among persons, groups and social classes. And that (ii) these relations, in turn, are related to the concept of reasonable value, which was elaborated by Commons in order to draw attention to the conflicting, imperfect and evolutionary nature of the process of social value. As he puts it,

Each economic transaction is a process of joint valuation by participants, wherein each is moved by diversity of interests, by dependence upon the others, and by the working rules which, for the time being, require conformity of transactions to collective action....Reasonable Value is the evolutionary collective determination of what is reasonable in view of all changing political, moral, and economic circumstances and the personalities that arise therefrom to the Supreme bench. (Commons, 1990[1934], pp. 681, 683-684)

Reasonable value is, by definition, an imperfect process, whose characteristics can be interpreted as the synthesis of the conflicting and evolutionary components of collective action. The imperfection of social valuing stems also from its partly unconscious and conflicting character, often embodied in habits of thought and life. In this sense, social value process goes to the heart of the nature of political economy, which bears a close relation with law and ethics. Hence,

If the subject-matter of political economy is not individuals and nature's forces, but is human beings getting their living out of each other by mutual transfers of property rights, then it is to law and ethics that we look for the critical turning points of this human activity. [Commons, 1990(1934), p. 57]

Commons's Negotiational Psychology

In order to cast a better light on these manifold phenomena, he has elaborated the concept of *negotiational psychology*, aimed at interpreting the conflicts of collective action as expressed through the complex web of transactions and institutions. In his words,

If it be considered that, after all, it is the individual who is important, then the individual with whom we are dealing is the Institutionalized Mind. Individuals begin as babies....They meet each other, not as physiological bodies moved by glands, nor as "globules of desire" moved by pain and pleasure, similar to the forces of biological and animal nature, but as prepared more or less by habit, induced by the pressure of custom, to engage in those highly artificial transactions created by the collective human will....The psychology of transactions is the social psychology of negotiations and the transfers of ownership....Thus each endeavors to change the dimensions of the economic

values to be transferred....This negotiational psychology takes three forms according to the three kinds of transactions: the psychology of persuasion, coercion, or duress in bargaining transactions; the psychology of command and obedience in managerial transactions; and the psychology of pleading and argument in rationing transactions....Negotiational psychology is strictly a psychology of ideas, meanings, and customary units of measurement. (Commons, 1990, quoted: 73-74, 88, 91, 106)

In concluding these paragraphs, it seems interesting to note that, notwithstanding their differences, Commons's and Veblen's psychological theories present notable complementarities: for instance, it seems true that **(i)** as underscored by Veblen, persons are driven in their action by their instincts (or propensities), which interact in a complex way with the characteristics of the institutional context; and that **(ii)**, at the same time, as highlighted by Commons, persons acquire in their reciprocal interaction an "institutionalized mind" that orients the expression of their propensities according to their role in economy and society.

3. The Links with Pragmatist Social Psychology

As emerges from the previous account, Veblen and Commons provide interesting and complementary interpretations of the ownership where the psychological and "relational" aspects play a central role. Commons's notion of intangible property brings to the fore the corresponding extension of the notion of ownership and of distribution of power related to it. These aspects, coupled with Veblen's notion of ownership as a relation of personal dominion, cast light on the circumstance that the notion of ownership extends itself well beyond the sphere of pecuniary values for embracing the whole domain of social life.

In this respect, ownership embodies also the character of a public good, which includes the capacity of the system to provide an adequate social environment for the inner realisation of the person. In this regard, one central insight of Veblen's analysis is the inability of pecuniary culture based on the profit motive to ensure a full expression of the workmanship and parental bent instincts (or propensities) of the person. These aspects have been developed by social psychologists close to institutionalism, in particular of pragmatist orientation.

John Dewey's "Individualism, Old and New"

We will consider some of these contributions. We can start with John Dewey's article "Toward a New Individualism", that belongs to a series of articles published in the progressive magazine "New Republic" and collected in the book *Individualism, Old and New*. He begins his article by noting that our productive life is acquiring a corporate and collective character. And that, conversely, our moral culture is still "saturated with ideals and values of an individualism derived from a pre-scientific, pre-technological era.", Dewey, "Toward a New Individualism" [1999 (1930): 37], quotation taken from the 1999 edition. The somewhat paradoxical idea of Dewey is that the spiritual roots of such individualism are to be found in medieval religion. In this sense,

The apparent subordination of the individual to established institutions often conceals from recognition the vital existence of a deep-seated individualism....the fact that the controlling institution was the Church should remind us that in ultimate intent it existed to secure the salvation of the individual....The power of established institutions proceeded from their being the necessary means of accomplishing the supreme end of the individual. (Dewey, *ibidem*: 37)

It is interesting to note how this wild form of individualism went in tandem with political absolutism and a very hierarchical society. With the advent of industrial revolution, many things had changed, and societies became more dynamic, but such kind of individualism — expressed in the form of natural rights — remained relatively unaffected and persisted also in the next stage of corporate capitalism. This stage, despite its semblance of individualism, is much more than individual capitalism based on collective action. This assertion can appear paradoxical: in fact, is it not true that corporations are privately owned?

This is true, of course, but it is also true that the activities of corporations require a notable socialisation of their activities as they must work together and interact each other in order to keep the system working. Also, the legally “private structure” of corporations often conceals the articulation of the stakeholders. These include not only the classic shareholders, but also other subjects like workers, consumers, local and (especially today) civic communities and environmental groups.

Although these aspects would require a different and more collective attitude, the earlier creed of economic individualism still persisted. But, notes Dewey, “If [this individual creed] is not an echo of the echo of a voice of a long ago I do not know what it is.” (Dewey, *ibidem*: 38)

In this respect, the “pure individualism” so often held at the basis of American development plays in the corporate time a modest role and exists only “in the movie and the novel”. But the persistence of this old individualistic creed in a context that requires a totally different attitude has caused the phenomenon of “lost individual”.² This comes about in a situation of “anomie”, when there is for the persons a lack of social relations and no clear meaning of the public functions of their activities. As noted by Dewey,

They [influential and wealthy people], may be captains of finance and industry, but until there is some consensus of belief as to the meaning of finance and industry in the civilization as a whole, they cannot be captains of their own souls....Their reward is found not in what they do, in their social office and function, but in a deflection of social consequences to private gain....An economic individualism of motives and aims underlies our present corporate mechanism, and undoes the individual. (Dewey, “The Lost Individual”, 1999 [1930]: 27, 30, quotation taken from the 1999 edition)

² From his previous article first published in New Republic, 1930, and later in the quoted volume *Individualism, Old and New*, 1999. A related and interesting analysis is contained in *Liberalism and Social Action* [2000 (1935)] and *Freedom and Culture* [1989 (1939)].

This lack of social meaning has its economic counterparts in economic insecurity, unpredictable and disruptive business cycles, chronic unemployment and precarious work. A situation of this kind, as people cannot live in a *vacuum* and continue to express their need of social relations, calls for vacuous and surreptitious values of “liberty” and “nationalism”. In this way, a kind of uniformity of thought is engendered but, notes Dewey, such standardization does not go deep. In fact,

Its superficial character [of such standardization] is evident in its instability. All agreement of thought obtained by external means, by repression and intimidation, however subtle, and by calculated propaganda and publicity, is of necessity superficial; and whatever is superficial is in continual flux. The methods employed produce mass credulity, and this jumps from one thing to another according to the suggestion of the day. We think and feel alike—but only for a month or a season. Then comes some sensational event or personage to exercise a hypnotizing uniformity of response. At a given time, taken in cross-section, conformity is the rule. In a time span, taken longitudinally, instability and flux dominate. (Dewey, “Toward a New Individualism”, quoted: 42)

² From his previous article first published in *New Republic*, 1930, and later in the quoted volume *Individualism, Old and New*, 1999. A related and interesting analysis is contained in *Liberalism and Social Action* [2000 (1935)] and *Freedom and Culture* [1989 (1939)].

It is then a psychological anchorage to a wild and unsocial form of individualism that produce these evils. Their overcoming, for Dewey, rests in promoting an economic system based on element of democratic socialism and new, social oriented, forms of individuality.

Some Aspects of George Herbert Mead's Symbolic Interactionism

This interesting analysis of Dewey, which seems written yesterday, is of course not alone in the field of institutionalist and pragmatist social psychology. For space reasons, we cannot address in the detail various contributions (see also Hermann, 2020), that often have significant complementarities with Dewey's analysis. We will briefly address George Herbert Mead's Symbolic Interactionism.

The symbolic interactionism of George Herbert Mead underlines the social nature of our thoughts, that take form of an inner dialogue between the “Me” of the persons (their conscious instance, broadly corresponding to the psychoanalytic *ego*) and the I, that corresponds to the unconscious internalisation of the others' response to our action through the internalisation of a common code of conduct (which has interesting parallels with the psychoanalytic notion of *superego*). These concepts are vividly expressed in the following passage,

The self which consciously stands over against other selves thus becomes an object, another to himself, through the very fact that he hears himself talk, and replies. The mechanism of introspection is therefore given in the social attitude

which necessarily man assumes toward himself, and the mechanism of thought, insofar as thought uses symbols which are used in social intercourse, is but an inner conversation. (Mead, "The Social Self", 1913, in Reck 1964, p.146)

The interest of this analysis lies in the circumstance that it wonderfully blends the individual and social aspects of human psychology. For instance, the capacity of the person to respond to his/her own inner talk implies the capacity of the self to take the role of others (or of a 'generalised other') in the case of widely shared opinions.

This capacity also constitutes an essential ingredient of child development. In this regard, notes Mead, the capacity of the child to acquire the role of parents cannot be reduced to mere imitation, since it represents for the child a way for getting acquainted with its social world. A notable aspect of this analysis is its evolutionary character. Values and opinions are not a static whole but are co-extensive with the evolution of persons and society. Hence, conflicts between different values are the stuff and substance of such evolution and the acceptance of the new values implies a reorganisation of the self. Hence, the incapacity of social empathy is at root of many social evils. For instance, notes Mead, there can be persons who would risk their lives to save other persons in danger, but that nonetheless would consider it "normal or inevitable" the deaths linked to bad road conditions and lack of medical aid for the poor. The social implications of his theory are addressed in the article "Natural Rights and the Theory of Political Institution". Here he underscores the necessity for the system of natural rights – as set forth in the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe – to go beyond an abstract formulation in order to address the real needs of the living society. In this sense,

"Human rights are never in such danger as when their only defenders are political institutions and their officers... [in fact]... every right that comes up for protection by our courts or other constitutional institution is confessedly in a form which is incomplete and inadequate, because it represents a social situation which is incomplete and inadequate....[for this reason].... the ultimate guarantee must be found in the reaction of men and women to a human situation so fully presented that their whole natures respond. (Mead, "Natural Rights and the Theory of Political Institution", in Reck, quoted, pp.169, 170)

Of course, this is true, but it is also true that the legal and judicial decisions are important for expressing what is the "reasonable value" in complex and often inherently conflicting matters. As noted before in dealing with Commons's analysis, the selection of the reasonable practices, for instance in labour issues, constitutes a central aspect of the evolution of the notion of public purpose. This finds its expression in the complexity of policy action, which includes not only the action of government and parliament, but also that of justice courts, and of social subjects like unions, consumers associations, local communities. Hence, all social bodies can play an active role in policy action.

A better participation process, by improving the related process of social valuing, can contribute to formulate policies more tailored to the profound needs of society.³

Further remarks

The previous theories of social psychology underscore, among other things, how the ideology of wild individualism conflates with the inner need of socialisation of the persons. This aspect is central, of course, but leaves somewhat in the background the reasons that lead to unsound social relations. What psychological factors make it difficult for persons to create a socio-economic system more responsive to their real needs? And what are their “real needs”? This relates to the central question of the characteristics of human nature. Are we sure that human nature really prefers egalitarianism and democracy? It cannot be the case that the intrinsic nature of the persons is that described by Thomas Hobbes—the war of all against all? And that, for this reason, the wild and predatory individualism of our societies is but a “normal expression of the real nature of people?”

On that account, even cursory look at the real societies shows the prevalence of, in Veblen’s terminology, invidious distinctions of wealth, power, rank and status. These features are typical not only of capitalism but go back to virtually all early societies, where the ceremonial and relatively immutable aspects of these invidious distinctions were even more marked. In a sense, it is only from the 1789 French revolution and the emergence of the industrial era that — along with its enormous problems, exploitation and injustices — such rigid and hierarchical societies began to be challenged by progressive movements aimed at asserting the rights of workers and citizens. As a result, more democratic and fair systems in the workplace and in the society began, slowly and imperfectly, to make their inroads. But, despite such progress, our societies are still largely based on marked inequality of income and power.

There are of course reactions against this state of affairs, but in the main the psychological roots of inequalities seem hard to eliminate since many persons seem to have “internalised” these aspects. In the face of such evidence, many people tend to think, in a typical conservative way, that socio-economic inequalities cannot be amended as they constitute but an expression of the true human nature. Such view, however, seems too simplistic since disregards the intrinsic need, underscored by Dewey and Mead, of the persons to establish sound interpersonal relations and the related evolution, however difficult and slow, towards fairer societies. So, the question poses itself as whether the distress of “the lost individual” can be traced back to psychological factors that go to reinforce the cultural split underscored by Dewey and Mead. One aspect that hints towards such direction is that the related instability over time of “the uniformity of thought” is certainly true but it is also true that, however different the specific contents of such thoughts may be, some typical characteristics remain very similar. On that account, it is easy to see that virtually all phenomena of uniformity of thought and mass manipulation are based on a strong and

³ Another interesting definition of the concept of social valuing is the following, “To conceive of a problem requires the perception of a difference between ‘what is going on’ and ‘what ought to go on’. Social value theory is logically and inescapably required to distinguish what ought to be from what is....The role of social value theory is to provide analyses of criteria in terms of which such choices are made.” (M. Tool, in Hodgson, Samuels and Tool, 1994, pp. 406, 407). This is linked to the “instrumental value criterion” which pertains to the goal of “the continuity of human life and the non-invidious re-creation of community through the instrumental use of knowledge”, (Tool, 1986, p. 50).

emotional identification with a collective entity and its leader. Such entity can be the nation and/or regional or local areas, various groups like political parties, clubs, and associations.

The leader(s) and the related groups tend to be idealised, often in a fanatic way: everything they do is, by definition, appropriate, and the critical spirit is at its minimum. And when the leader and/or the group do something patently wrong, this tends to be justified on the ground that such actions were necessary for withstanding an external attack. Thus, for instance, many people tend to attribute all the good to their nations/regions/neighborhoods and all the bad to outside groups.

Now we will look at a number of psychoanalytic theories that can cast light on these manifold issues.

4. Psychoanalytic Contributions to the Concept of Ownership

Let us see what psychoanalysis can say about these aspects. Given the complexity of the issue, we consider, without any claim of completeness, only few relevant concepts/psychoanalytic schools.⁴

Some Aspects of Sigmund Freud's Theory

In order to illustrate some of the potentialities of psychoanalysis to the study of these phenomena, we will address the main theses contained in one of the most important Freud's contributions—*Totem and Taboo*.

In this book, Freud underlines the uncertainties which accompany the study of primitive populations and the highly conjectural nature of the conclusions emerging from all the studies dealing with them. In investigating the social structures of these populations, Freud discovers that they embody more restraints concerning their social and sexual life than one can imagine at a first sight. The main aim of these restrictions is to prevent sexual relations among family and tribal members, and especially between the son and the mother and between the brother and the sister. The interesting aspect of these restrictions is that they are at the same time social and religious restrictions, and so concur to shape the structure of these early societies. But, how did Freud arrive at such conclusions? His starting point was the relation between totemism and exogamy. The totem can be an animal, a plant or a natural force to which a tribe has attributed particular sacred qualities. The totem is considered as the originator of the family and is assumed to protect and guide its members as long as they abstain from committing two major crimes; (i) killing (and eating) the totem and (ii) being married or having sexual relations with the members of the tribe.

These prohibitions — and also many others, related to the first two, pertaining to the social life of these populations, as the phobias of touching and being infected, which have many parallels with the obsessive neurosis of our time — assume the character of a taboo, which is defined by Freud as a feeling of "sacred horror" towards an object stemming from an affective ambivalence which expresses itself through a conflict related to opposite feelings: for instance, the (mostly unconscious) desire of touching an object paralleled by an opposite fear of doing such prohibited action. In this sense, the object may stand for parental figures. Without entering the complex social consequences of these prohibitions, there appears to be a close link between the sacred

⁴ For a general orientation on the complex world of psychoanalysis see, among others, Charles (2018), Fine (1979), Kernberg (1998, 2004), Nagera (1969).

character of the totem — which comes to assume the nature of a religious taboo — and the exogamic organization of these early societies. But, where do these prohibitions stem from and which is the nature of their social ties?

The common roots from which these prohibitions originate are identified by Freud in the dynamics of the *Oedipus* complex which constitutes a relevant experience for the child.⁵ Given the importance of the issue, it can be useful to briefly recall the main aspects of such complex, which can be defined as the organized whole of a child's loving and hostile feelings toward its parents. In such complex, from a son perspective, the father is hated, as he stands for a rival in the possession of the mother. In this way, the father assumes a repressive character in that he prohibits the sons from having sexual intercourse with the women of the group. But the father is, at the same time, loved and admired as he tends to constitute, in his role of parental figure, a social and cultural model to be imitated. And the opposite relation, in which the mother stands for the "rival" parent and so assumes a repressive role, tends to happen in the daughter's experience. As a result of this situation — in which there is a desire, considered "bad", and a corresponding defence trying to repress it — a neurotic disturbance emerges, which may express itself in many different forms of behaviour and fantasies.

This conflict tends to become distressing for the child and so needs to be repressed. But this repression does not solve the affective problem, it obtains only that such conflict is not expressed directly but by means of neurotic disturbances.

Needless to say, the dynamics of the *Oedipus* complex are far more tangled than could appear from this brief description. Owing to this complexity, throughout his research activity, Freud identified many aspects and forms of the *Oedipus* complex and many neurotic disturbances which may be caused by it.

In his analysis of these societies, Freud hypothesized that, at their beginnings, they were characterized by the dominance of a jealous and aggressive father.

The mounting anger of the sons at the father's behaviour may have led them to join together in order to kill and eat him, but their inner sense of guilt, accompanied with their unconscious identification with the father, prevented them from fully accomplishing their desires.⁶ In this sense, the totem was made object of an ambivalent feeling of love and hate, which was closely intermingled with the emergence of the first institutions and the related moral duties (or social conscience). For this reason, the interest of these findings for institutional economics can hardly be exaggerated.

In this respect, the concept of *superego* can help to explain such patterns of behaviour as it represents the psychological instance through which cultural values are internalised by the person and for this reason constitutes a fundamental link between individual and collective psychology. The *superego* can be considered as the heir of the *Oedipus* complex, since it arises from the

⁵ As already noted, Freud himself and later psychoanalytic contributions stressed the importance of every stage of life for the formation and evolution of personality and the related psychological disturbances.

⁶ Freud's account is mainly related to the analysis of the psychological conflicts of fathers and sons. Obviously, also mothers and daughters undergo the same kind of conflicts. For this reason, investigations on these aspects of differential psychology would be particularly interesting. Among the many psychoanalysts women who provided important contributions to these issues we can mention Anna Freud, Karen Horney, Edith Jacobson, Melanie Klein, Margaret Mahler, Clara Thompson.

internalisation of the prohibitions and of the moral and cultural values of the child's caretakers—as perceived by the child. As shown by psychoanalytic experience, the *superego* tends to be shaped after the *superego* of the parental figures and this is one of the reason for the strain of conservatism present in many societies.

Freud is well aware of the highly conjectural nature of these historical reconstructions but underlines that the important factor for the arising of a neurotic conflict is not so much the reality but the fantasy of aggression concerning the parental figure. In this regard, Freud points out that these historical processes unfolded throughout many centuries and gave rise to different outcomes across different societies. In this respect, the important aspect stressed by Freud is that the inner sense of guilt of the sons for killing (at a real or imaginary level) the father pushed them to repress in various ways their aggressiveness. Nevertheless, as evidenced before, this evolution had not eliminated the neurotic structure of these societies.

The "Object Relations" Theories

Other noteworthy contributions — indicated as object relations theories even though it is difficult to identify for them a completely unitary framework — have been provided by the so-called "Independent Approach" (the former "Middle Group") in British psychoanalysis.^{7,8} Some important exponents are Michael Balint, John Bowlby, Marjorie Brierly, Ronald Fairbairn, J.C.Flugel, John Rickman, Ella Sharpe, Donald Winnicott. This approach has many parallels with the American contributions to this field. Some important authors are Edith Jacobson, Heinz Kohut, Otto Kernberg, Hans Loewald, Margaret Mahler and Arnold Modell.

Such contributions have been, in various ways, critical of Sigmund Freud's, Anna Freud's and Melanie Klein's theories on the grounds that, notwithstanding their differences, they all tend to focus attention mainly on the "biological" side of instincts.⁹ And, for this reason, they do not fully consider the role of affection and object relations in individual development.

Although these contributions have triggered a lively debate, they hold important aspects of Freud's theory and also adopt, in many cases, a Kleinian framework for the explanation of the first stages of development.¹⁰ Also Anna Freud's contributions played a significant part in the

⁷ For a deep analysis of these theories refer to, among others, Aviram (2009), Clarke, Hahn and Hoggett (2018), Grotstein (2009), Klein, Heimann and Money-Kyrle (1955), Rayner ((1991), Sandler and Dreher (1996), Tyson and Tyson (1990).

⁸ The label "Middle Group" refers to the circumstance that these theorists adopted a kind of intermediate stance between the theories of Anna Freud and Melanie Klein, which were still considered too "biological oriented" (more on this just below).

⁹ As noted before, one important reason why S.Freud remained attached to a "biological" concept of instinct resides in his purpose of underlining the role of psychosexuality in human psychology. In this regard, he tends to employ the term eros or libido as a synonymous with love.

¹⁰ The approach of Melanie Klein (1964, 1975) is particularly significant for our theme. She analysed, from a new perspective, the mechanisms underlying the child-mother relationship in the early stages of infancy. Particularly relevant are the mechanisms of internalization, scission and projection, through which the child tries to cope with its ambivalence and aggressiveness towards the mother. These feelings are likely to be particularly intense in the first months of life. In its (the child) attempt to cope with the anxiety and aggressiveness related to this early relation, the mother is divided into "a good and a bad object", which are unconsciously "internalised", through an identification process. This stage is

formation of these new theories, even if her major influence was on the formation of the “ego psychology” school, mainly developed in the American context.

In this sense, the object relations psychoanalysts try to integrate and deepen these theories rather than dismissing them. They have adopted a more integrated view of the human personality, which more explicitly embraces its complex needs and orientations. In this sense, the distinction between “biological”, affective and intellectual needs tends to be considered as an expression of the various aspects making up the human personality, which, therefore, need to be studied in their complex interaction.

On the basis of this approach, it seems reasonable to posit that human needs are complex and interrelated and, as a consequence, a child needs: (1) to be fed and protected; (2) to establish sound object and interpersonal relations; (3) more generally, to develop in an integrated way all the aspects of its personality.

In this light, psychoanalysis, especially in these new developments, is acquiring a more distinct evolutionary character (see, for instance, Rayner, 1991, Sandler and Dreher, 1996). This implies that, as these relations cannot unfold in a *vacuum*, the analysis of characteristics of the social contexts become more and more pertinent. For this reason, there is arising a growing area of collaboration between psychoanalysis and social sciences.

The Psychoanalysis of Groups and Organizations

The widely held idea that psychoanalysis is only an individual psychology is a bit out of mark. As a matter of fact, Freud considers individual and collective psychology as two complementary aspects of the same phenomenon—owing to the circumstance, that in ancient times group life was pre-eminent and that only subsequently the person (and the institution of family) has gradually acquired a more defined role within the various groups of society.

As noted by Freud (in particular, 1912-1913, 1921) and by subsequent psychoanalysts, group cohesion tends to be based on the following processes: (i) emotional links among the members of the group; (ii) projection of individual aggressiveness into people and/or institutions lying outside the group; (iii) identification with the group leader — who symbolizes the parental instance (typically, the father) — in order to repress the conflicts related to the *Oedipus* complex. These processes can help to explain the scission that often occurs within groups between “the good and right”, lying inside the group, and “the bad and mistaken”, lying outside its boundaries.

described as “the schizo-paranoid position”, because in this way the child tends to split its personality into two mutually incompatible elements. The child tries to retain all its “good qualities” through the following defence mechanisms: internalising the “good and protecting mother” and, at the same time, projecting its aggressiveness into the “bad and aggressive mother” who is therefore — as result of this process, named “projective identification” — felt as a hostile and persecutory figure.

Subsequently, as the child grows up, this stage may be overcome to varying degrees as the child recognizes that the mother is just one person and, as a consequence, tries to compensate for the imaginary attacks made against her. This stage is indicated as “the depressive position”, which corresponds to the process of (psychic) differentiation from the mother and the parallel discover of the father, other persons and, more generally, the external world. M.Klein’s theory sheds new light on many social phenomena by providing a deeper understanding of the conflicts that, while arising in the infantile development, may heavily impinge upon the type of relations adults establish within groups and institutions.

Building on these insights, there has been among psychoanalysts a growing attention to the collective dimension of psychological phenomena.

By using the Kleinian framework, Bion (1970) investigated unconscious group dynamics by means of "The Therapeutic Group", while Kernberg (1998) made significant contributions to the analysis of group behaviour by employing his approach based on the object relations theory.

All these contributions stress the role of groups and organizations for expressing the needs and conflicts of the person. For instance, to the person, the group may represent an idealized ego; and, in this connection, its "morals" and "code of conduct" symbolize parental figures who, through a process of "internalisation", play the role of *superego*. In this regard, it is important to note that the instance of *superego*, certainly, stems also from a normal human tendency to establish sound interpersonal relations, and, accordingly, to behave with affection and solicitude towards each other and continually improve the "bright aspects" of personality. However, whereas in non-neurotic situations the "code of conduct" emerging from such tendencies asserts itself as a genuine behaviour, in neurotic situations leading to the formation of *superego* things run in a completely different way: here, the tendency of improving personality tends to be, under an appearance of goodness and morality, subordinated to the expression of neurotic contents at cross-purposes with such tendency. As stressed by the authors just mentioned, quite often the severity of *superego* leads — through the so-called paranoid and narcissistic transformation of personality, extensively studied in psychoanalysis — single individuals, groups or societies to do nasty and persecutory actions towards other individuals, groups or societies into which their aggressiveness has been projected, and so to sabotage, in the meaning reviewed before, the possibility of establishing sound interpersonal relations. This process constitutes an important explanation, complementary to those proposed by social psychology, of the phenomena of nationalism and xenophobia so often present also in our time. Of course, the intensity of these phenomena is exacerbated by economic crisis, but these are never absent even in period of booms, when international relations are (or seem) more friendly and relaxed.

Conclusions: Implications for the Analysis of the Ownership

We can start by noting that Veblen and Commons's analysis are particularly illuminating of the evolutionary pattern of the concept of ownership. In fact, these theories allow us to track the contradictions related to the historical passage from (i) a "materialistic" concept of ownership that, as we have seen, corresponds to the "possession" of all the relations occurring therein, to (ii) a concept of intangible ownership, more based on the actual recognizance of the rights and needs of the person involved in the institutional life.

On that account, there are many areas in which Veblen's and Commons's analyses can interact with social psychology and psychoanalysis.

As for the social psychology of Dewey and Mead, the predatory aspects of ownership highlighted by Veblen go in tandem with an unsocial notion of individualism resting on the Hobbesian "war of all against all". And, conversely, only a social oriented conception of individualism can allow the unfolding of Commons's intangible property based on a more equitable society.

As for psychoanalysis, the importance, stressed by Veblen, in the institution of ownership, of the possession of persons, finds a new explanation and validation in the psychoanalytic concepts addressed before.

Thus, every disturbance occurring in particular in the *Oedipical and pre-Oedipical* stages of development may lead to a later incapacity of the person in establishing sound social relations and to the corresponding neurotic need of getting a mere, narcissistic-oriented, "dominion and control" over these relations.

In this respect, linking the neurotic and predatory concept of ownership to predatory habits towards institutions can constitute a promising avenue of research.

In fact, such predatory habits entail a fight for power having its focus in — at the real and symbolic level — "possessing institutions". But, since, as noted before, an institution constitutes an organized whole of collective action controlling, liberating, and expanding individual action, this implies that "possessing" an institution is related to an unconscious fantasy of omnipotent control over all the relations occurring therein. This is another way of showing that ownership is not a person-to-goods but a person-to-person relation. According to this interpretation, the reason why, under these predatory habits, institutions are considered like things to be owned does not rest in the circumstance that institutions are appraised as things in any meaning of the word, but in the fact that "the owners" of the institutions, in trying "to control and dominate" the social relations taking place therein disregards all the needs and opportunities that may potentially arise from the people involved in these (frustrating and neurotic) social relations.

The investigation into the predatory character of institutions makes it easier to identify the social relations underlying the exchange of goods (and persons). In this sense, it can be fruitfully employed in the anthropological enquiry into the social and psychological structures of different societies.

Furthermore, it has significant parallels also with Marx's analysis of alienation of capitalistic society based on "social relations between goods". These relations are characterized by considering, on the one side, the worker just like any other good, and, on the other, by appraising the goods not for their use-value but as symbols of wealth — e.g., for the related social relations of economic dominion — they carry with them. But since, according to Marx's theory, the value of goods derives from the labour embodied in them, it ensues that possessing goods and wealth means, at real and symbolic level, possessing and controlling the labour required for their production. In this context, the notion of wage-slavery, on which is based the extraction of surplus value (coming from the unpaid labour in the factory system) for the capitalistic class, well synthesizes these aspects.

In this respect, the historical process of the concept of ownership can be considered as the evolutionary outcome of a conflict, socially rooted, among different tendencies:

- (i) one, more neurotic-based, mostly resting on the predatory possession of goods and persons to which, however, corresponds a situation in which persons do not really know and "own" their minds;
- (ii) the other, more oriented towards achieving a more sustainable, equitable and participatory society and aimed at empowering persons to better "own", and hence express, their potential.

In this regard, looking at these socio-economic perspectives also through the conceptual lens of a more far-reaching notion of ownership can help attain a better process of social valuation—which, as we know, constitutes a central concept of OIE. And such process, in turn, can improve the capacity of policy action to realise the progressive perspective (ii) just mentioned. The concepts addressed before can help better define various complementary aspects of such perspective. One of this is the “instrumental value” criterion, that pertains, as noted before, to “the continuity of human life and the non-invidious re-creation of community through the instrumental use of knowledge”. This goal is coextensive with the overcoming of the cultural split of the “lost individual” highlighted by pragmatist social psychology, and of the neurotic aspects leading to predatory behaviour underscored by psychoanalysis. This virtuous process will help realise a better capacity “to love and work” highlighted by psychoanalysis, a perspective which bears a striking parallel with Veblen’s theory of workmanship and parental bent instincts.

There are numerous fields where this approach can be applied. These include studies of the motivations and conflicts underlying the various spheres of economic action — work, consumption, investment, saving — related to persons, groups, classes, public and private institutions, and how progress can be promoted, distorted or frustrated in economic and social life. Relatedly, this perspective can also provide significant elements for the analysis of the imbalances and tensions of the economic system and the most effective policies for overcoming them.

In the analysis of these issues, an interdisciplinary perspective seems particularly indicated for casting a better light on these aspects.

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