

A pragmatic contribution for a more reflexive institution-based trust

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This paper presents a philosophical reflection on the concept of trust in order to promote a pragmatic reflexivity in institutionalist theory. The objective of this article is to indicate why the best way to deal with trust issues is to reflexively balance their rational and routine origins. Understood as an individualist effort for the rational action theory, such reflexive requirement nevertheless asks for a complex interrogation of the nature of the intersubjectivity at stake. To fully understand the sources and the mechanisms of institution-based trust requires taking into account the peculiar bond that actors have with their own institutional framing as a condition of stability of their common-sense world. People rely on institutions to interact on daily basis and reflexivity is the mechanism that operates the equilibrium between individual reason and institutional routine. Neoinstitutionalist approaches in organisational theory are often understood as having integrated such modality. We believe on the contrary that they have not sufficiently taken into account the reflexive requirement where a pragmatic understanding of institutional trust does. Our contribution calls then for a research methodology based on scientific humility and for the definition of pluralist and experimental collective action principles.

Keywords: trust; reflexivity; institutionalism; pragmatism; rational action theory; social phenomenology

1. Introduction

Trust is a revealing phenomenon to study in terms of collective action. Understood as a social resource, trust gives access to the best outcomes – meaning the less expensive ones in terms of information gathering and resource investment – in the prisoner dilemma, the opportunist defection of the free-riding issue and the tragedy of the commons (Hardin, 1968). These three working hypotheses reveal a fundamental paradox for any collective action: individual rational strategies lead to collective suboptimal results. Indeed, cooperation may seem irrational from a strictly individualist economic point of view: why should someone put himself/herself in a vulnerable position regarding someone else, or should restrain himself/herself from using the work accomplished by others? A trusting stance between multiple actors gives them the opportunity to solve the paradox, and to reach the more efficient outcome. This is why trust is considered such an essential mechanism in organisational and managerial settings.

As famously stated by the economist Mancur Olson, ‘unless the number of individuals is quite small, or unless there is coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest, rational, self-interested individuals will not

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