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# LAW AS INSTITUTION

by

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 Springer

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*I wish to dedicate this book to my sister,  
Adriana La Torre*

# Preface

This book – which is the result of several years of research, discussion, writing and re-writing – consists of three parts and eight chapters. The first part is given by the two first chapters introducing the issue of validity and facticity in law. The second part (Chapters 3, 4 and 5) is the core of this study and tries to present a theory based on a specific view about language and social practice. The third part deal with the issue of value judgments and views about morality and consists of Chapters 6 and 7. Chapter 8 should finally serve as epilogue.

In the first chapter a discussion is started about the relationship between law and power, seen as a presupposition for an assessment of the nature of law. As a matter of fact, as has been remarked, “general theories of law struggle to do justice to the multiple dualities of the law”.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, law has a “dual nature”: it is a fact, but it also a norm, a sort of ideal entity. Law is sanction, but it is also discourse. It is effectivity, or facticity, but it is also a vehicle of principles among which the central one is justice. But this duality is not only a phenomenological, or a matter of justification and implementation as two separate moments. It is an ontological quality too, and it is there from the beginning, from the moment where law “springs” as a distinct experience and practice. Here we are then confronted with the question of power.

Law without power (some would say without “sanction” or “force”) is not even conceivable or definable. This is so because law is a portion of reality which at the same time produces reality (conducts). Law is the power of doing things that “hold” in society. But at the same time this power should not exceed given limits and has to follow certain criteria, and the law is there to check power, to constrain it. Power and law are thus inextricably related. This is the reason why legal theory and philosophy are first of all theories about the relationship between law and power. So that there are theories which defend the primacy of law over power, and other ones which reverse the role of law, and consider this as instrumental to power. In Chapter 1 the former are played against the latter, to consider their relative merits and deficiencies. Legal positivism and natural law are here really the issue, the one stressing facticity, the other appealing to ideality. Constitutionalism and the rule of law in this sense indeed are a development of the modern natural law tradition.

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<sup>1</sup>J. Raz, *Between Authority and Interpretation*, Oxford 2009, p. 1.

Chapter 2 concludes the first part of the book by considering an alternative view about the relationship between power and law. Here the main approach discussed is Hans Kelsen's "pure theory". As a matter of fact, Kelsen presents his own theory as a solution to the controversy, in so far as power is reconceptualised as an order of rules, a legal order, or more simply as "law". In this sense, the opposition between law and power dissolves. However, such dissolution is only apparent, since on the one side the law is conceived as based on coercion and facticity and on the other hand whatever effective law is ennobled as "valid" system of law.

In the second part of the book there is a shift towards a consideration of the law as a phenomenon possibly concerned with language. Once traditional explanatory strategies are seen as unsatisfactory, and nevertheless law is accepted as being a social fact, there is the possibility of addressing this fact as somehow analogically linked with a system of language. This is attempted in Chapters 3 and 4. Here there is first an analysis of theories of linguistic meaning, their limits and merits and their possible consequences for the explanation of human action and for the concept of law. Several theories of meaning are assessed and finally the so-called use theory is outlined as the most convincing (though with some important caveats) and as the closest to the legal point of view. Actually the use theory thinks of "use" in terms very similar to legal notion of "custom" or "customary law". For the use theory in a sense language is the same as "customary law". However, "custom" here is not mere regularity, but eminently a normative game and a special room for action, a play of giving and asking for reasons. Recent developments in philosophy and in philosophy of law, especially rational pragmatism, discourse theory and inferentialism, seem to largely support this view.

Once assessed the "use theory" as the most reliable approach to language meaning, in Chapter 4 there is the attempt to build a bridge between such theory and the traditional institutionalist theories of law. These are reviewed and then supplemented through the neo-institutionalism more recently defended by Neil MacCormick and Ota Weinberger. Neo-institutionalism is then shown to be the most promising approach to cope with the ontology of law, though some reform in the standard theory is proposed to render more plausible and less circular the definition given of what an "institution" means and is. In particular, constitutive rules or "declarations" cannot be kept outside an institutionalist perspective, though they cannot be said to produce directly "institutional facts" or better the scope of action which the "institution" consists of. They are rather "conditions" to be prescribed in understanding and performing a piece of conduct. This is why a definition of "institution" is advanced whereby constitutive rules are integrated with a notion of efficacy and effective performance.

Chapter 5 resumes the discussion of the relationship between law and power, while power is now conceptualized through the notion of institution. Kelsen's solution thus appears more promising, if however power is no longer related to facticity or coercion or sanction, but rather to institutional facts and institutions.

The third part of the book develops and tries to make explicit the normative side of the idea of law as institution. Here in Chapter 6 there is first a summing up of

meaning theories and of their implications for a conception of normative language. Special attention is devoted to the “speech acts” theory. After that in Chapter 7 an attempt is made to apply the results obtained in Chapters 3 and 6 to meta-ethics and the study of morality and moral sentences. Meta-ethical doctrines are reviewed and criticized by focusing then to the issue of universalizability. At the end of the chapter a definition of the moral point of view is advanced. In this chapter – which is of special importance to the argument of my research – moral doctrines are assessed at the meta-theoretical level and a particular attention is given to “discourse theory” approaches.

The “institution” of institutionalist doctrines usually claims to be self-sufficient. This in the book is seen as a deficiency. The law in particular has an ideal side which a Wittgensteinian notion of institutional fact seems not to be able to grasp. However, Wittgenstein himself by referring when speaking of an institution to its “Witz”, its “point” or “sense”, points out that we need a content and ideal side. This need to be explicitly thematized, and this is Chapter 7’s main task.

Finally, Chapter 8 concludes summing up what the neo-institutionalist approach defended would imply as for the relationship between law and morality. Here different approaches are reviewed and discussed. The outcome is a partial endorsement of a discourse theory approach. Institutionalism, old and new, to make sense of the ideal side of law, of its dual nature, cannot maintain morality outside the precinct of legal practice. In this sense, institutionalism – to be faithful to its own notion of institution – cannot keep faith to legal positivism. Institutionalism needs – this might be a conclusion – morality and a theory of morality to render justice to the concept of law we adopt from the internal point of view. But the morality theory searched for cannot be a Platonist one, distant from practice, and imposed upon it, or even one that could believe to derive practice from one or a few basic principles in a logi-cist mood. Law’s own ontology (and practice) is normative and therefore requires to be explained an idealist perspective as well. A moderate meta-ethical cognitivism will be the way out from the realist dumbness of legal positivism. And a moderate cognitivism rooted in the pragmatics of legal discourse will have as a consequence a defence of a moderate connection between law and morality: a connection more “practical” than just “conceptual”.

In short, this book springs from the need to go beyond Neil MacCormick’s and Ota Weinberger’s institutional theory of law. The need is to trace back the lines of the theoretical tradition of legal institutionalism, to see how much of it has stood the test of time and more modern developments in legal theory, and link these “residues” (which are considerable) with a new version of legal institutionalism that has been gaining ground in recent years. In this book I try to link together those two formidable pieces of research, the “old” and the “new” institutionalism, and to render their philosophical bases explicit, specifically as far as the philosophy of language is concerned. In this area my aim is to outline the connections between theory of meaning, theory of the norm and theory of legal validity. To this end I put to the test some of the most debated theories of meaning, reaching the conclusion that institutionalist legal theory can be better “founded” if an equally institutionalist theory of language (a “use theory”) is adopted.



The stimulating character of neo-institutionalism derives – I believe – from the fact that it makes possible to adopt an institutional perspective without having to accept the heavy holistic and essentialist presuppositions which were at the bottom of the “old” institutionalism. It accepts, for instance, the concept of a “rule”, and makes it rather a constitutive element of institutions. And by introducing the idea of “rule” into the walls of “institutions” it render these permeable to individual reflection and criticism. Rules, as matter of fact, whenever they are not conceived as mere regularities or scientific laws, imply what Hart calls a “reflective attitude”; and reflection cannot but be exercised by individuals. Neo-institutionalism thus allows for individualism, which is the starting point of modernity and of what Jürgen Habermas calls “post-conventional morality”. Here, therefore, institutions are not meant to resuscitate the socialization of the “ancient” passing through the integration of individuals in a community supposedly primordial and the adhesion to effective models of action considered as fully constitutive of individual ethical conduct.

Nor would the new kind of institutionalism I defends follow any dream of ontological excellence of collective social entities, though ascribing to the institution a proper existential dimension. Between organicism (and the celebration of *Volksggeist*) and empiricist reductionism (and the acknowledgment only of “brute facts”) it marks a third way. In particular, challenging and extremely promising is the possibility offered by neo-institutionalism of connecting a notion of institution with a moderately cognitivist approach to ethics, so to avoid the strong moralism and objectivism usually connected to institutionalist views, such as those for instance of Georges Renard, Rudolf Smend or Arnold Gehlen. This actually is my main objective in this book: to conjugate an institutional legal theory with a (moderate) cognitivist meta-ethics, to land into a procedural and deliberative concept of political action.

Indeed, I seek principally to fill an embarrassing gap: the lack in of a definition of “institution”. Once in possession of this concept, it is then applied to the thorny topic of the binding force of law, a point that institutionalists have largely neglected. Eventually, my claim is that the notion of institution prepares the ground for a redefinition of the concept of power. To do so it is obviously necessary to take a third factor into account as well as law and power: “society”.

It is important to stress that my legal theoretical project needs a cognitivist meta-ethics as a preparation to his conclusive step: a reassessment of the disputed relationship between law and morality. Here it is made clear how institutionalism does not preclude a reflective and critical morality and thus both connects and separates the legal and the moral domain. On the other side the concept of law I develop from an institutional perspective, rejecting as this does the imperativist background and the prescriptivism present even in recent more refined versions of normativism (such as those by Kelsen, Ross and Hart), leaves open the field for an antiauthoritarian and deliberative conception of the body politic. For instance, a prescriptivist theory of law cannot solve the dramatic contradiction between a rule which grants rights (freedoms and powers in the end) and the same rule seen as essentially imperative and hence as a restriction of human capacities of agency.

Rights have been the other recurrent subject in my research. In my book *Disavventure del diritto soggettivo* (Giuffrè, Milano 1996) I strongly criticized the reductionist strategy of conceiving rights as a mirror of commands and obligations. My attempt there was to re-conceptualise rights first as thick concepts which cannot be submitted to an empiricist and logicist treatment such as the one proposed by Alf Ross in his famous “Tû-Tû” article. Rights are not vehicles to be taken to any destination. There is in them a thick cultural and political core. Moreover, they are mostly powers, not pale reflexes of other more fundamental deontic operators. The triad of traditional deontic operators cannot – this was my claim – offer an intelligent account of rights’ conceptual structure. Rights indeed have a permanent problem with legal positivism which tries to tame them through a reductionist strategy. On the contrary, institutionalism, especially in the shape given to it in this book, focussing on constitutive rules as the basic rules of a legal system and, moreover, having of the rule a concept of a device that enlarges and does not reduce human chances of action, can perfectly accept rights as products of normative propositions. To take rights seriously, to calmly accept their particular ontology and their intricate logical structure, another, different theory of law is needed: this – I believe – is neo-institutionalism.

This work bases and is a development of my *Norme, istituzioni, valori* (Laterza, Bari 1999). It re-elaborates on this previous monograph, trying to make of my theoretical proposal a more integrated and convincing case. And it would not have been conceived and carried on without the inspiring research project of two masters of legal theory, Professors Ota Weinberger and Neil MacCormick, who have both sadly passed away last year. I learned so much from them and I owe such a lot to their intelligence, scholarship and friendship that they may be said in a sense sort of co-authors of my work. The following pages are also meant as a tribute to the memory of these two great scholars.

# Contents

## Part I Law and Power

<b>1 Two Opposing Conceptions</b> . . . . .	3
1.1 Preliminary . . . . .	3
1.2 The Law as Expression of Power. “Analytical Jurisprudence” and Legal Positivism . . . . .	6
1.3 The Supremacy of the Law. Natural Law, Constitutionalism, the Rule of Law . . . . .	12
1.4 Power as Expression of Law. Léon Michoud and Hugo Krabbe . . . . .	18
<b>2 The Normativist View</b> . . . . .	25
2.1 Preliminary . . . . .	25
2.2 Power Conceived of as Law: Hans Kelsen . . . . .	26
2.3 Law, Command, Norm . . . . .	33
2.4 Normative Order, Political Power, Dominion . . . . .	42
2.5 Autonomy, Heteronomy, Ideology . . . . .	52

## Part II Language, Norms, Institutions

<b>3 Meaning and Norm</b> . . . . .	61
3.1 Preliminary . . . . .	61
3.2 Theories of Meaning . . . . .	62
3.3 Objections to the Verificationist Theory . . . . .	63
3.4 Objections to the Theory of “Representation” and to the Psychological Conception . . . . .	65
3.5 Objections to the Behaviourist Theory . . . . .	70
3.6 Theories of Norms and Theories of Validity . . . . .	74
3.7 An “Institutionalist” Theory of Language . . . . .	87
3.8 The Concept of Law. A First Approximation . . . . .	95
<b>4 Law as Institution</b> . . . . .	97
4.1 Preliminary . . . . .	97
4.2 Santi Romano’s Theory of Law . . . . .	98

- 4.3 Old and New Institutionalism. Santi Romano Compared  
with Neil MacCormick and Ota Weinberger . . . . . 109
- 4.4 The Concept of “Institution”. A Proposal . . . . . 115
- 4.5 Binding Force and Mandatoriness of Norms . . . . . 125
- 4.6 Institution and Intentionality. The Problem of the Social Identity . 129
- 4.7 The Particular Character of Legal Norms . . . . . 132
- 5 Law and Power . . . . . 135**
  - 5.1 Preliminary . . . . . 135
  - 5.2 The Sociological Tradition. Two Models . . . . . 136
  - 5.3 The Institutional Approach: From Hauriou to Weinberger . . . 145
  - 5.4 Law as “Culture” . . . . . 155
  - 5.5 Power and Rule . . . . . 159

**Part III Meaning and Values**

- 6 Meaning and Value Judgements . . . . . 169**
  - 6.1 Preliminary . . . . . 169
  - 6.2 Theories of Meaning Once More . . . . . 171
  - 6.3 Two Contrasting Views: Bertrand Russell and John L. Austin . . 181
  - 6.4 Meta-ethical Implications . . . . . 188
- 7 Value Judgements and Justification . . . . . 193**
  - 7.1 Preliminary . . . . . 193
  - 7.2 Naturalism, Utilitarianism, Intuitionism . . . . . 197
  - 7.3 Emotivism and Prescriptivism . . . . . 206
  - 7.4 Universalizability of Moral Judgements. Linguistic  
Community and Discourse Theory . . . . . 213
  - 7.5 Non-cognitivism and Critical Morality . . . . . 218
  - 7.6 The Legal and the Moral Domains: Initial Conclusions . . . . . 223

**Part IV Epilogue**

- 8 Law and Morality . . . . . 231**
  - 8.1 What is at Stake? . . . . . 231
  - 8.2 Definitions and Distinctions . . . . . 232
  - 8.3 The Concept of Law . . . . . 236
  - 8.4 Connections Between Law and Morality . . . . . 241
  - 8.5 Separation of Law and Morality . . . . . 244
  - 8.6 “Definitional” and “Derivative” Formulations . . . . . 252
  - 8.7 Epilogue . . . . . 255

**Name Index . . . . . 261**

**Subject Index . . . . . 265**