Kheiron

The Extended Person in the Age of Artificial Agents

In Greek mythology, Kheiron —Chiron— was a singular centaur. He did not embody brute strength or lack of control, but knowledge, teaching, and mediation. He was a hybrid being: neither fully human nor fully animal. A mentor of heroes and a healer, he represented a form of intelligence born from the tension between different natures.

This book uses his name as a metaphor.

Here, *Kheiron* names a contemporary figure that is still difficult to define: the extended person, an emerging way of being a person that no longer exists in isolation, but in symbiosis with institutions, technologies, and artificial agents. This is neither the replacement of the human being nor a naïve fusion with machines, but a new hybrid configuration that redefines what it means to act, decide, trust, and take responsibility in complex societies.

Before entering into this transformation, however, it is worth clarifying how this book is structured.

The first part functions as an accelerated roadmap. It presents, in condensed form, the core ideas of the argument, with a clear objective: to allow you to quickly assess whether this approach is of interest to you. If, at the end, you feel it is not for you, you will have invested little time. If you decide to continue, you will already have a conceptual framework that will make the rest of the reading far more fruitful.

The second part unfolds that map at a slower pace. There, the arguments are developed in depth, through historical and contemporary examples and in dialogue with other thinkers who have explored the relationship between person, institution, and technology. It is not a repetition, but an expansion.

This book does not offer closed answers. Rather, it seeks to name a threshold: a point of transition where inherited institutions are no longer sufficient, technologies are no longer neutral, and people begin to inhabit configurations that overflow traditional categories. Like Kheiron, we move within an intermediate space—fertile, uncertain, and difficult to govern.

Introduction

We live in a striking paradox. Our contemporary society has reached levels of material, democratic, social prosperity and technological development unprecedented in history, and yet, broad sectors of the population experience acute forms of exclusion, precarity, suffering, and misery. Dickens' observation about his time—"it was the best of times, it was the worst of times"[1] —remains disturbingly relevant.

Which means the question that should keep us awake is: why? How is it possible that after so much progress, we still resemble—at least in part—the world of two centuries ago?

This book does not claim to have the answer. No one does. But it does aim to offer a different way of looking at what is happening to us—and, above all, understanding *why* it is happening.

Three ideas structure this book:

1. **Trust**. Without it, everything would disintegrate. With it, everything is possible[2]. Trust is the social glue that holds us together.
2. **The person**. We are much more than isolated bodies. We are networks, relationships, bonds[3]. You do not end at the limits of your skin: you extend into your relationships, your memories, your environment.
3. **Institutions**. They are agreements, not always voluntary, between people—languages, laws, traditions, hierarchies, markets, religions, parties,

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[1] Dickens, C. (1859). Historia de dos ciudades. "Era el mejor de los tiempos, era el peor de los tiempos, la edad de la sabiduría, y también de la locura...

[2] Fukuyama, F. (1995). Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity. Free Press.* Fukuyama argues that trust is the fundamental form of social capital that determines the prosperity of nations.

[3] Clark, A. & Chalmers, D. (1998). "The Extended Mind". Analysis, 58(1), 7–19.* The authors propose that the human mind extends beyond the limits of the skull, incorporating tools and external relations.

etc. They are the air we breathe in society without realizing it[4]. They free us and imprison us. They organize us and dehumanize us. Institutions expand our capacities for collective action, but simultaneously erode the bonds of trust[5]. They define us more than we think. Only by understanding how institutions construct us can we decide who we want to be.

This book therefore focuses on people: how we build societies, and how institutional mediations shape both the kinds of societies we inhabit and the kinds of subjects we become. And it examines the central dilemma: **we cannot transform society without transforming ourselves, nor can we transform ourselves without altering the institutions that shape us.**

It's a vicious circle... or virtuous, depending on how we approach it.

The Person

What is a person? Not the body you see in the mirror. That's just the most obvious part. A person is something far more extensive and complex: the living expression of an Inner Culture, an Outer Culture, and the emotions born in our relationships.

Inner Culture is everything you have been; your past. Your biography converted into a filter: your genetics, the family you got, the neighborhood where you grew up, the books you read, the wounds that healed poorly, the lessons you forgot. It is the sediment of experiences that shapes how you see the world today. You don't fully choose your Inner Culture, but it chooses you every time you interpret what surrounds you. It is the way your past looks at the present. It is the way your past looks at your present: what you notice, what you imagine, what you cannot—or will not—see.

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[4] Searle, J. (1995). The Construction of Social Reality. Free Press.* Searle explores how social institutions are human constructions that paradoxically feel as natural as the air we breathe.
[5] North, D. (1990). Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance. Cambridge University Press.* North, Nobel Prize in Economics, analyses how institutions condition economic and social development.

Outer Culture is everything that surrounds you right now and allows you to project your future. The work that exhausts or motivates you, the threatening economic crisis, the climate, the series everyone is talking about, the music you listen to without realizing it, the vacations you plan, the neighbor's argument filtering through the wall, the landscape, the new shop window. It is the noise of the present that, whether you like it or not, influences every decision you make. The accumulation of all these present stimuli, which affect us consciously or not, helps us anticipate what comes next—and is constantly reshaping our Inner Culture.

But a person is not just memory and context. **Emotional Intelligence, which helps you manage bonds and emotions with other human beings, is the third pillar.** Every bond you establish—with children, partner, friends, enemies—defines you with a more or less thick stroke. A human being without deep emotional bonds loses something essential. Emotional ties are not optional accessories; they are constitutive elements of who we are[6].

So, what is a person? A human being conditioned—at the very least—by a past that filters how you see the present (Inner Culture), an idea of the future built on a present context (Outer Culture), and the bonds you establish with others (Emotional Intelligence).

And here comes an important consequence: if your "self" doesn't end at your skin, your identity doesn't exclude the other and your freedom doesn't end where another's begins either. Your history, your environment, and other people: all of that is also you and you are part of others. Ignoring your environment limits you. Limiting another's freedom limits your own because the other is part of you, your context, and your history.

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[6] p.84 "Sin los demás, el hombre desbarata su naturaleza, pierde su pensamiento y su conducta más genuina y simplemente sucumbe y se enajena. Esto lo hemos visto en los seres humanos aislados a los pocos años tras el nacimiento, o conviviendo con primates en la selva." Francisco Mora. *Neurocultura. Una cultura basada en el cerebro*. Alianza Editorial. Madrid 2007. (Without others, a human being destroys their own nature, loses their most genuine thought and behaviour and simply collapses and becomes alienated.)

In society, we are intertwined. Intertwined by bonds of trust between people, by a shared environment and by utilitarian bonds with Institutions.

The Group

We are social beings not because of culture, but because of biology[7]. It isn't a choice; it's encoded in our genes. This biological disposition drives us irresistibly toward contact with other humans—to form couples, build groups, create communities. And the fundamental tool for establishing that contact is communication.

Communication is much more than exchanging words. It is a constant, multidimensional flow of information: gestures, tone, eye contact, silences, posture. We transmit and receive signals continuously, often unconsciously, in a mutual reading process essential to our social survival.

But here a fundamental tension emerges. We need others, yes—but we cannot blindly trust them. Human socialization is not naïve: through communication we collect data and impressions about those around us because experience—both individual and evolutionary—has taught us, often painfully, that some humans can be a real danger.

So we instinctively distrust what is new or unknown[8]. It is a defense mechanism as old as our species.

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[7] p.196 "Como para muchos antropoides, también para los seres humanos la convivencia en grupos tenia una indispensable función de supervivencia." Norbert Elias. *La Sociedad de los individuos*. Ed. Península. Barcelona. (For humans, as for many primates, living in groups had an indispensable survival function.)

[8] p.91 "En el difícil proceso, de esos pocos millones de años que ha durado la hominización, la homogeneidad y cohesión social ha debido tener un gran valor de supervivencia. Esto quiere decir que todo aquello que está fuera del grupo y el más inmediato entorno y además es diferente, es considerado rompedor y generador de desconfianza y agresión, muy particularmente otros seres humanos, que aun con el mismo color de piel, tienen diferentes anatomias, hablan diferente, se pintan diferente, emiten sonidos diferentes y tienen conductas y valores diferentes. La diferencia vista así siempre ha creado agresión y violencia por la simple razón evolutiva de que produce inseguridad y desafia la supervivencia. Estos son codigos cerebrales que posiblemente se hayan grabado a fuego en el cerebro." Francisco Mora. *Neurocultura. Una cultura basada en el cerebro*. Alianza Editorial. Madrid 2007.

How do we resolve this paradox between need and caution?

How do we determine whether it is safe to trust the person in front of us?

The answer lies in how we process all that information that communication provides us. We use a complex analysis process that operates at two simultaneous levels: rational and emotional intelligence[9]. The brain evaluates the logical coherence of discourse, detects contradictions, analyzes patterns. The heart reads emotions, captures sincerity or falsehood, intuits hidden intentions. This dual reading—analytic and intuitive—allows us to understand, or at least reasonably infer, who the other person is and to what extent we can place trust in them.

And here lies the core of every social bond: communication generates knowledge—rational and emotional—, knowledge enables trust, and trust is what allows us to establish bonds of cooperation[10]. This chain allows us to anticipate the actions and reactions of other human beings[11], something absolutely essential when our very biology demands that we live in groups[12]. And trust enables us to work together, coordinate efforts, share resources, adopt altruistic behaviors that at first glance seem to go against our individual interest. It is precisely in that moment—when trust enables cooperation—that we cease to be isolated individuals

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[9] p.13 "From a purely practical point of view we need an analytical and an intuitive mind to get by day-in day-out. Without two minds life would be so effortful and demanding that we'd end up being unable to function, overwhelmed by the number, range and complexity of the tasks we face." Eugene Sadler. *The Intuitive Mind*. A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Publication.

[10] p.37 "Para descubrir lo que las personas piensan que son, lo que creen que están haciendo y con que propósito piensan ellas que lo están haciendo, es necesario lograr una familiaridad operativa con los marcos de significado en los que ellos viven sus vidas. Esto no tiene nada que ver con el hecho de sentir lo que los otros sienten o de pensar lo que los otros piensan, lo cual es imposible". Clifford Geertz. *Reflexiones Antropológicas sobre temas filosóficos*. Ed. Paidós. Barcelona 2002.
(To understand what people think they are, what they believe they are doing and for what purpose, we must become familiar with the frameworks of meaning within which they live their lives.)

[11] p.89 "La capacidad que una persona tiene para intuir o representar en su propio cerebro o en su mente la perspectiva psicologica que tiene la otra persona le permite predecir la conducta de los otros." Francisco Mora. *Neurocultura. Una cultura basada en el cerebro*. Alianza Editorial. Madrid 2007.
(The ability to intuit or represent in one's own mind the psychological perspective of another person allows one to predict their behaviour.)

[12] Bachmann, R. (2001). "Trust, Power and Control in Transorganizational Relations". *Organization Studies*, 22(2), 337–365.

and become something qualitatively different: a group. And the group—that network of communications and mutual trusts—is the seed of every possible society.

Societies do not emerge from abstract contracts or external impositions, but from trust born of mutual knowledge—and that knowledge is only possible through communication[13]. When communication is distorted and trust erodes, societies are only sustained through pressure and force[14]. Without trust, there is no true society. Only control. Monitored individuals.

Institutions: when trust is not enough

Imagine a small group of people who have known each other for years. Everyone knows who cooks best, who is most skilled at fixing things, who tells the best stories. In that group, things work by self-organization: no one needs to order who does what, it simply happens. Deep knowledge of others allows almost telepathic coordination[15].

But there is a scale problem. When the group grows, direct interpersonal trust becomes mathematically impossible[16]. No one can intimately know hundreds of people, let alone thousands. How, then, can basic group needs—feeding, caring, resting, celebrating—be met when not everyone knows one another?

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[13] As Frederick Douglass said: "Mankind are not held together by lies. Trust is the foundation of society. Where there is no truth, there can be no trust, and where there is no trust, there can be no society. Where there is society, there is trust, and where there is trust, there is something upon which it is supported." Frederick Douglass, "Our Composite Nationality" (7 December 1869), Boston, Massachusetts.

[14] Zak, P. J., and Knack, S. (2001). Trust and growth. *Economic Journal*, 111: 295–321. Published by Wiley on behalf of the Royal Economic Society. — Morgan, Robert; Hunt, S. (July 1994). "The Commitment-Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing". *The Journal of Marketing*, 58 (3): 20–38. doi:10.2307/1252308.

[15] Bruner, Jerome (1991). *Actos de significado*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial. Bruner explains how everyday human interactions generate meaning and cultural structure without the need for formalised rules.

[16] Robin Dunbar (1992). "Neocortex size as a constraint on group size in primates". *Journal of Human Evolution*, 22(6): 469–493. Dunbar argues that the number of stable social relationships a human can maintain is limited to around 150 people (the so-called "Dunbar's number").

The human answer to this dilemma has a name: Institutions[17].

An institution is, in essence, an agreement between people to facilitate their organization without needing to know each other intimately. It is a virtual intermediary that enables strangers to act together.

Think about it: language is an institution that allows us to communicate without needing to invent a private code each time. A market is an institution that allows trading without having to blindly trust each seller[18]. Marriage regulates couple life through socially agreed norms. Taboos control behaviors without needing police on every corner. Monarchy facilitates the exercise of power through shared rituals. Religion structures our relationship with the unknown.

Each institution is an elegant solution to a problem of social coordination. But here comes the fascinating part: because institutions mediate between people, they inevitably shape communication and behaviour. And not trivially. By conditioning how we speak and act, institutions reshape trust and the very way we perceive others.

As Norbert Elias observed, biologically identical human beings, living in similar environments, will act in radically different ways if they have different institutions[19]. A group of people in medieval India, another in China of the same period, and another in contemporary Barcelona are, biologically, the same animal. But the institutions through which their relationships are mediated create entirely different societies—and entirely different kinds of persons.

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[17] Douglass North (1990). *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*. Cambridge University Press. North defines institutions as "the rules of the game in a society" that structure incentives in human exchange.

[18] Avner Greif (2006). *Institutions and the Path to the Modern Economy: Lessons from Medieval Trade*. Cambridge University Press. Greif analyses how mercantile institutions enabled trade between strangers in the Middle Ages.

[19] "La sociedad somos todos nosotros, es la reunión de muchas personas. Pero la reunión de muchas personas, forma en la India o en China un tipo de sociedad muy distinto al que forma en Barcelona o en Suiza; la sociedad medieval que en el siglo XII formaba en Europa un conjunto de personas particulares era distinta a la del siglo XVI o a la del siglo XX." Norbert Elias. *La Sociedad de los individuos*. (Even with similar individuals, different institutional environments produce very different societies.)

Institutions don't just organize societies. They shape who we are[20].

Knowledge in the Group

Relationships are the raw material of group life. They don't just help us adapt—they give us back a mirror in which we discover who we are. When you relate to others, you learn about them... but also about yourself, because part of your identity takes shape in another's gaze[21]. As Mary O. Wiemann reminds us, without differences there's no comparison, and without comparison there's no knowledge or life[22].

Yet when an institution is placed between people, something is inevitably lost. The institution filters and manages part of the rational knowledge of relationships. In doing so, it physically distances people: direct contact is no longer necessary to manage aspects of coexistence. And here's the catch: we gain efficiency, but we lose information about people. It becomes harder to truly know the other, harder to imagine what they're like, and this affects how much you trust them. With less contact, trust diminishes, and diverse experiences are reduced to standardized protocol[23].

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[20] Mary Douglas (1986). *How Institutions Think*. Syracuse University Press. Douglas argues that institutions not only coordinate actions but fundamentally shape the cognition and identity of individuals.

[21] p.66. "El otro cuando es reconocido como persona, impone su limitación al yo por el solo hecho de su existencia como otro personal. El yo que toma en serio la alteridad y la personalidad del otro, debe dejarse destronar, debe renunciar a su papel de centro exclusivo del universo". Josep Maria Coll Alemany. *La relación interpersonal*. Fundación Emmanuel Mounier. Colección Persona. Salamanca 2010. (The other, when recognised as a person, dethrones the ego from the centre of the universe.)

[22] p.101 "Cuando queremos establecer comunicación con alguien, cuando queremos relacionarnos, tenemos que conocer a esa persona y esa persona tiene que conocer quienes somos. La forma en que ambos lograremos este primer conocimiento es a través de la autopresentación que nos permite vernos y compararnos con el otro. Ver las diferencias y similitudes respecto a uno mismo, y es una manera de comparar, valorar e interesarse en comunicarse. Yo puedo quererme mucho, pero si me encuentro con mi doble exacto, en todos los aspectos, no necesitare comunicarme con él, pues ya lo sabre todo de él y nada me aportará. Sin diferencias, no hay comparación, no hay cambio, no hay conocimiento, no hay vida". Mary O. Wiemann. *La Comunicación en las Relaciones Interpersonales*. Ed. UOC Aresta. 2011.

[23] p.74 "Un organismo no se desarrolla de manera normal a menos que esté expuesto a determinadas experiencias." *Estructuras de la Mente*, Howard Gardner. FCE México 1994. — As Bruce Lipton notes: "Los procesos de crecimiento requieren un intercambio libre de información con el medio, la protección requiere el cierre completo del sistema. Una respuesta de protección mantenida inhibe la producción de energía necesaria para la vida." "Lo que pensamos varía nuestra

A domestic example illustrates this perfectly:

Imagine you're in charge of waking up your family every morning. As you do it, you see how each person reacts: who needs a gentle "good morning," who only responds to coffee in hand, and who springs up with military energy. That small ritual gives you intimate knowledge and adjusts your bonds. You learn what they're like and how you should act with each one. It's tacit, cumulative, valuable knowledge.

Now imagine you establish a rule: "At seven, when the alarm sounds, everyone gets up" and you buy an alarm clock for each person. You've created a simple but effective institution—in other words, you've institutionalized the process by creating a norm. This frees you from the task of going around waking everyone up, true. But it also deprives you of that intimate, daily knowledge about others and about yourself that you were building each morning.

Does the trade-off pay off? Almost always, yes. The knowledge that face-to-face contact provides in many situations is minimal compared to the time saved by institutionalizing tasks. Moreover, institutionalizing lets us plan the future better, reduce uncertainties, coordinate complex actions[24].

But there's a hidden cost that accumulates silently.

If in our social life we keep adding layers upon layers of institutions—one for money, another for education, another for justice, another for love, another for leisure—we eventually lose all direct knowledge of the other people living in our society. And when knowledge disappears, trust vanishes with it.

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biología". Bruce Lipton, MD, cell biology researcher. Interview by Ima Sanchís, *La Vanguardia*, 09/09/2011.
(Growth requires openness; permanent self-protection shuts down development.)
[24] p.21 "Intuitions are invaluable early warning signals and filtering devices that can be combined with analysis to project the future and plan ahead." Eugene Sadler. *The Intuitive Mind*. A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Publication.

Eventually, a paradox emerges: as interpersonal trust erodes, institutions take its place as the glue that holds groups together, because every group still needs bonds of trust. You no longer trust people—now you trust the system. The institution facilitates life together, defines the group, and articulates a world of shared meanings[25]. We shift from "I trust you" to "I trust the contract will be fulfilled," "the law will be enforced," "the nation will protect me," "the club will honor me"...

We've solved the problem of massive coordination, but we've created societies of strangers who often coexist without knowing each other. And the disturbing question is: **how many institutional layers can a society withstand before interpersonal trust is completely replaced by institutional dependence?**

Types of Institutions: A Necessary Taxonomy

Not all institutions are equal. Their impact, reach, and dangers vary enormously. Certain patterns, however, make it possible to group them into four broad types, which help clarify how societies evolve.

I propose a classification into four levels: micro-institutions, institutions, super-institutions, and meta-institutions. This isn't a hierarchy of value, but of complexity and scale. Each level emerges when the previous one reaches its coordination limits. Each solves problems but also creates new constraints.

Human history can be read as a gradual expansion of institutions that broaden collective capacity while reshaping how individuals think and behave.

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[25] p.105 "lo que constituye una comunidad cultural no es solo el compartir creencias acerca de como son las personas y el mundo o acerca de cómo valorar las cosas.(…) hay algo que puede ser igual de importante para lograr la coherencia de una cultura, y es la existencia de procedimientos interpretativos que nos permitan juzgar las diversas construcciones de la realidad que son inevitables en cualquier sociedad." J. Bruner. *Actos de Significado*. Alianza Editorial. Madrid 1991. (Shared interpretive procedures are as important as shared beliefs.)

Micro-institutions are subjective, non-formalized agreements. Nobody wrote them in a legal code or registered them with a notary. They're oral pacts, implicit, sometimes even unconscious, affecting very small groups of people in reduced spaces: families, hunter-gatherer clans, groups of friends[26]. They're in our genetics and therefore, to a greater or lesser extent, in many animals.

The archetypal example is language.

Nobody hands us a detailed manual on how to speak. Babies (and even some animals) learn it through proximity to another being who already uses it.

Other equally powerful micro-institutions:

- **Children's play**: Young children and the young of many animals establish implicit rules when they play (taking turns, limits of acceptable violence, signals that "this is play"). Nobody formally teaches them these rules.
- **Gestures of reciprocity**: The unwritten norm of returning favors, of helping those who helped you, of sharing with those who shared with you. It's an institution as ancient as our species.
- **Parent–child bonds:** shaped by culture even without written rules.
- **Eye contact and proxemics**: The rules about when it's appropriate to look someone in the eyes, how much physical distance to maintain depending on the type of relationship. They vary culturally, but they're always present.

But just because they're "micro" doesn't mean they're minor or trivial. On the contrary: these informal institutions are the most powerful and fundamental of all. Language, for instance, isn't just a vehicle for communication: it's a mechanism for conceiving the world[27]. Through it we construct the reality around us, preserve it,

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[26]Robin Dunbar (1996). *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*. Harvard University Press. Dunbar argues that language evolved as a form of "vocal grooming" to maintain cohesion in small groups.

[27] Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956). *Language, Thought, and Reality*. MIT Press. The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis suggests that language structure conditions how we perceive and conceptualise reality.

and transmit it. Language allows us to create and transmit stories, and stories allow people to define themselves, explain themselves, objectify their perception and share it. Speaking also reinforces trust bonds: it facilitates knowing the other, their intentions, their desires.

These micro-institutions, though smaller in geographic reach and not involving many people, are the foundation that enables building a group and a culture. As Jerome Bruner points out, "human beings, in interacting with each other, create a sense of the canonical and ordinary that constitutes a backdrop against which to interpret and narrate the meaning of the unusual, of what deviates from 'normal' states in the human condition.[28]"

Without functional micro-institutions, no formal institution can survive. Even the best laws fail when people cannot communicate, cooperate, or trust. Micro-institutions form society's underlying operating system.

Institutions: When Agreements Become Formal

When groups grow beyond circles of direct familiarity, micro-institutions prove insufficient. When a group reaches a certain number of members or lives scattered across a big geographic space, there simply isn't enough time to talk with everyone.

Then arises the need to make agreements explicit and formalize them, though still orally[29]. It becomes necessary to create norms transmitted verbally and enable spaces for social communication where the customs and traditions governing that group can be explained. To compensate for this lack of direct communication that prevents large groups from knowing each other and organizing themselves, people

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[28] p.82. J. Bruner. *Actos de Significado*. Alianza Editorial. Madrid 1991. Bruner explains how everyday human interactions generate meaning and cultural structure without formal rules.

[29] Douglass North (1990). *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*. Cambridge University Press. North distinguishes between formal institutions (written laws) and informal ones (social norms transmitted orally), both structuring behaviour.

agree on norms, oral laws, customs, and techniques transmitted from mouth to mouth, generation to generation[30].

Here appear institutions properly speaking: oral laws, codes of honor verbally transmitted, explained traditions, rituals with established procedures, artisanal or production techniques. They're explicit agreements that are memorized, recited, told, and that coordinate dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of people who may not know each other. They require someone to remember and transmit them: elders, teachers, bards, priests, judges who memorize precedents[31], friends who explain ways of acting in a group or family members who transmit that family's traditions.

The great change from micro-institutions is that now the agreement is explicitly verbalized, formalized in language, though not written. It's no longer something that simply "is done" implicitly, but something that "is said" must be done. The norm can be stated, explained to outsiders, deliberately taught, or even imposed.

This reduces the need for personal familiarity but allows groups to compare themselves with others, adopt new practices, and articulate shared worldviews.

Experience becomes transmissible technique; tradition becomes teachable knowledge.

With these changes, knowing what you can or can't do in the group no longer depends so much on intimate knowledge of people, but on knowledge of what the norms allow and the roles established. Generally, it's more important to know the norm than to personally know who enunciates it. This fact facilitates the expansion and improvement of norms, but weakens direct interpersonal trust.

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[30] Walter Ong (1982). *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. Methuen. Ong analyses how oral cultures develop sophisticated mnemonic techniques and how oral transmission conditions the kind of knowledge that can be preserved.

[31] Jan Vansina (1985). *Oral Tradition as History*. University of Wisconsin Press. Vansina documents how non-literate societies maintain complex histories, genealogies and laws through oral transmission over centuries, with specialists in charge.

People and institutions begin to validate each other. When the norm is explicitly verbalized, society begins to differentiate more markedly. Social position is no longer determined solely by a person's experience and capabilities. A person's position and connection with oral institutions becomes a crucial aspect. You do what a person indicates not because they're very intelligent or very strong, but because they're the spokesperson of the law, the priest who knows the rituals, the elder who remembers the traditions, the bard who sings the genealogies[32]. The position gives prestige to the person and the person is interested in giving prestige to their position through enhancing the importance of its institution.

An example perfectly illustrates this transformation:

Let's imagine a group of hunters or a small clan. In these groups, where micro-institutions predominate, a person of great knowledge, much strength, or who has been touched by the gods can lead the group. And as long as they're the strongest, most intelligent, or still touched by the gods, they'll remain the leader. The leader answers directly to the others and the others choose or follow them because they know and value their skills, strength, or other characteristics.

Now let's imagine an environment with formalized oral institutions: a numerous tribe or extensive group. There too a person can emerge who, through their strength, intelligence, or because the gods have chosen them, claims to lead the group. But now, when their leadership is accepted, an entire oral rite of passage is created to insert that person into an institution of leadership transmitted verbally—for example, royalty. Formulas will be recited, oaths proclaimed, genealogies sung connecting the new leader with ancient kings. The person will be invested with a position through ritual words: "Now you are the King. Long live the King!" The person becomes The King.

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[32] Marshall Sahlins (1963). "Poor Man, Rich Man, Big-Man, Chief: Political Types in Melanesia and Polynesia". *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 5(3): 285–303. Sahlins analyses how, in tribal societies, authority is legitimated through verbal rituals and control of ceremonial discourse.

We'll still be facing a concrete person—a leader who commands because they're strong, intelligent, or have been touched by the gods—but now, additionally, they'll do so invested as King through verbal formulas that the entire group has heard and recognizes. And it becomes as important or more so that they've been proclaimed King according to the correct formulas[33] as who the person is.

Moreover, now, generally, the person no longer answers directly to others. There are intermediaries who know the oral laws, soldiers who protect the institution, priests who recite precedents, elders who remember how it's always been done[34]. And the leader, even if he or she become weak or ignorant, if the verbal formulas keep being recited in their favor, if the oral rituals continue legitimating them, will remain in position. Between the leader and the people we've added oral institutions that facilitate management but prevent direct personal knowledge.

Oral institutions also redistribute resources

The appearance of formalized oral institutions implies something more: the amplification of differences in a society's resource distribution. By the mere fact of being proclaimed king, consecrated priest, or named judge, that figure accesses a larger portion of resources. The institutional position, verbally expressed and recognized by the group, justifies and legitimates material inequality[35] because those people/institutions validate or give meaning to the group and for this they're important.

Oral institutions have clear advantages over micro-institutions: they allow larger scale, predictable norms, and coordination across distance. This is the stage of

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[33]Jack Goody (1987). *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral*. Cambridge University Press. Goody studies how investiture rituals in oral societies depend crucially on the correct recitation of specific verbal formulas.

[34] Pierre Bourdieu (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power*. Harvard University Press. Bourdieu argues that control of "legitimate discourse" —who may speak with authority— is a key mechanism in reproducing social inequalities.

[35] Pierre Bourdieu (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power*. Harvard University Press. The same insight is used to explain how institutionalised speech legitimises unequal distributions of resources.

great tribal societies, the first religious structures with specialized priests, the first transmissions of agricultural, manufacturing, or artistic techniques, systems of lineages and oral genealogies, verbally transmitted codes of honor, traditions. We're dealing with groups or societies that can coordinate thousands of people through spoken word, but still depend completely on human memory and direct oral transmission.

In sum, institutions are the first formalizable stage of society: they function because people agree on and respect norms shared orally. They're the basis of cooperation and social cohesion, though limited in reach and permanence.

Super-Institutions: When the Institution Detaches Itself from the Person

We've seen how micro-institutions emerge organically from human interaction and how oral institutions formalize those agreements once a group grows large enough. But both depend on human presence: someone has to be there to transmit, to remember, to recite.

Super-institutions break this dependency radically: the institution is embodied in a physical medium and becomes potentially immortal.

The archetypal example—and perhaps the most revolutionary in human history—is writing[36].

In oral societies, an institution still required a person who embodied it: someone who remembered the rule, held the ritual knowledge, or carried the authority that others recognized. The law lived in individuals; leadership lived in the body of the chief; memory lived in the elder.
 But when writing appears—and with it, the possibility of storing knowledge outside the human mind—institutions begin to exist **independently** of the people who execute them.

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[36] Jack Goody (1986). *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*. Cambridge University Press. Goody argues that writing is not just a recording technology but fundamentally transforms the social and cognitive organisation of societies.

Writing detaches the rule from the ruler.

Writing isn't just a technique for notation and decipherment. To write, it was necessary to "isolate" thought, convert it into a reproducible object through reminder-images: pictograms. By creating a pictogram, the human being has before them part of their thought externalized, objectified[37].

From this moment, a second revolutionary operation becomes possible: beginning to separate the pictogram from the object it designates. Symbol and meaning can be differentiated. At the end of this process, the graphic system becomes a writing of words[38]. The human being can not only preserve their thought in writing, but also has a tool for generating symbols and meanings that begins to become independent of the person. Anyone—institutions included—can appropriate the creation of meanings for the symbols a society uses in its communication.

The end of mandatory face-to-face contact

In societies based on oral institutions, the emotional distance between people has a natural limit: face-to-face contact remains essential. Orality implies that to know a group's norms and traditions, people themselves must transmit and explain them. Always, at some moment and place, the people forming the group or their representatives must gather to update their stories and share experiences. There's a physical cable connecting people: the human voice traveling through air.

Similarly, the unequal distribution of resources can't exceed a certain limit because, despite being invested with an institution, the person remains a visible part of the group and needs contact with other members. In oral societies, comparison with

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[37] C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 228.
[38] Walter Ong (1982). *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. Methuen, pp. 78–116. Ong analyses how writing restructures consciousness and enables cognitive operations impossible in purely oral cultures.

others is easy and the difference can't be so great without being justified through violence.

But with super-institutions, everything changes. When the institution is objectified on a physical medium—a book, a stele, a clay tablet—you no longer need any specific person to access this knowledge or carry it to another place. Before, what mattered was the figure of the person who had the knowledge or the position, and the object was a tool to help with its interpretation. In super-institutions, what matters is the object where knowledge has been deposited, and the person becomes a tool to help with its interpretation. Direct contact between people is no longer necessary.

From the subjective, living, and dynamic knowledge that a person has in an environment of oral institutions, we move to static knowledge, recorded on some medium, that can be transported and shared without the variations inherent to oral transmission[39]. A written rule does not get tired, does not age, does not forget, and does not improvise. It exists whether or not you understand it, whether or not you agree with it.

And this is when institutions begin to develop a life of their own.

They become **super-institutions** because they transcend the individuals who act within them. A judge can be replaced, but the court remains. A king dies, but the crown continues. A bureaucrat leaves, and the office functions without them. Written procedures can be transmitted, copied, preserved, and recovered even centuries later.

Pyramids of power and institutional logic

In super-institutions, a person's importance derives from the institution they represent, not the other way around. You no longer need great heroes to justify an

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[39] Havelock, Eric (1963). *Preface to Plato*. Harvard University Press. Havelock examines the transition from orality to writing in ancient Greece and how literacy transformed collective memory and cultural power.

institution: the institution justifies itself by its function among other institutions. When an institution delegates part of its function to a subordinate position, it's creating a hierarchy. Society adopts a pyramidal form[40].

An example: the King's butler is important because the King is. The King is important because he represents the monarchy. The monarchy is important because it represents the State. Each institution increases its power by creating networks of subordinate institutions, like roots infiltrating society. The more roots, the more immovable the main institution. And obviously, the larger an institution becomes, the more resources it will need and the faster it will consume them. Worse still, super-institutions radically alter how resources are distributed in a society.

When a society deploys super-institutions, resource allocation no longer goes to the person but to the institution: the army, the state, the guild, the monarchy, the senate, the corporation, the church. And it's the institution that decides how to distribute those resources internally. It becomes enormously complicated for people in a group to determine where resources go and how they're distributed[41]. And since it's difficult to control, any institution needing resources, without good oversight, tends to become a resource-predation machine.

Another crucial aspect of a society with super-institutions is conceptual. If you assume that a text—which is merely a human creation—has symbols with a determined meaning, it's easy to extrapolate that the reality surrounding us can also be symbols with a determined meaning[42]. The world is seen not only as something given, but as a creation that can be deciphered, as if it were writing. Everything can be interpreted and meanings can be assigned to arbitrary symbols. Writing and

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[40] Max Weber (1922). *Economía y Sociedad*. Weber analyses how legal-rational domination, based on written institutions and bureaucracies, generates hierarchical, pyramidal structures typical of modern states.

[41] James C. Scott (1998). *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. Yale University Press. Scott documents how modern state institutions make resource flows opaque and hard to trace through bureaucratic layering.

[42] Hans Blumenberg (1981). *The Legibility of the World*. Cornell University Press (English ed. 1993). Blumenberg explores how the metaphor of the "world as book" or "book of nature" emerges with literate cultures and transforms Western epistemology.

literacy generate a great change not only in the way of seeing the world but in the way of being a person in that world[43].

Super-institutions allow transcending the tribe's limits. They can assimilate other groups, encompass large territories, manage empires coordinating millions of people who will never know each other. Written laws travel on tablets. Imperial edicts are copied and distributed. Sacred texts unify beliefs across thousands of miles. Bureaucracy records, classifies, controls. All without people needing to see each other's faces.

We've gained scale. With super-institutions we can manage large groups, nations, empires. But we've lost something essential: the direct human bond that enabled interpersonal trust. In a society of super-institutions, you trust abstract systems, impersonal hierarchies, sacred texts, laws. You no longer trust people as much as Institutions. Super-institutions are so effective at managing large groups that they proliferate and consolidate rapidly in all societies.

And when super-institutions proliferate so much that they need "something" to coordinate them with each other, we take the final step: we create meta-institutions—institutions no longer to manage people, but to manage other institutions.

Meta-Institutions: the institutions that govern institutions

We've seen how micro-institutions coordinate people, oral institutions coordinate groups through word, and super-institutions coordinate societies through physical media. But when super-institutions proliferate, a scale problem arises: who coordinates the institutions?

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[43] Olson, David R. (1994). *The World on Paper: The Conceptual and Cognitive Implications of Writing and Reading*. Cambridge University Press. Olson details how writing changes the way we think and legitimise knowledge, consolidating super-institutions.

The answer: other even more abstract institutions. Meta-institutions.

Institutions enable society to grow, and a growing society needs more institutions. When this virtuous circle starts, institutions soon emerge faster than people can directly manage them. So, just as institutions were created to manage relationships between people, to manage relationships among many institutions we create meta-institutions. Contemporary examples: the modern nation-state, constitutions, global financial markets, ministries, international trade agreements, corporate enterprises, organizations like the UN, IMF, World Bank, the European Union, currency markets[44].

A meta-institution is an institution that:

- defines other institutions,
- supervises them,
- corrects them,
- regulates their interaction,
- preserves their memory,
- and sets the boundaries of what each one can do.

In other words, meta-institutions become the **architecture** of society. They don't only shape individuals; they shape the institutions that shape individuals.

The control dilemma: designed to be uncontrollable

To guarantee their independence and institutional solidity, meta-institutions are designed to make their control difficult. The motive is understandable: nobody wants a meta-institution controlling other important institutions to end up in the

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[44] David Held (1995). *Democracy and the Global Order*. Stanford University Press. Held analyses how globalisation generates meta-institutions that coordinate nation-states and economic systems at a planetary scale.

hands of one person or group who uses it for partisan purposes[45]. If a market, state, or legal system is controlled by one or a few people, we consider it a tyranny, an oligarchy, or an institutionalized autocracy. And generally that's not what society wants. Even with large companies or private organizations, mechanisms are created to avoid or hinder control by a single person or small non-institutionalized group.

But here's the trap: by creating meta-institutions free from any control, you lose the last guarantee of ethical action. The last guarantee of control over an institution is people. Without people who can intervene, there's no guarantee that the institution's objective is human well-being[46].

Free from control, meta-institutions respond only to the interests of other institutions (market, state, party, company), not to the needs of concrete people[47]. The fiction of "human" action with values disappears.

Current society is fundamentally based on institutions at this level, structured and interconnected as a network of hierarchies. A society directed by meta-institutions is uncontrollable and dehumanized.

We only gain control over meta-institutions when the situation is catastrophic and popular pressure is enormous: wars, chaos, financial crashes,economic crises, uncontrolled demographic movements, mass exterminations. But it's precisely in these moments when another drawback is revealed: the ease they offer for a strong or messianic figure to emerge as supreme leader.

The vicious circle: from crisis to authoritarianism

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[45] North, D. C. (1990). *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*. Cambridge University Press. North explains how institutional solidity reduces individual control and secures long-term stability.

[46] James C. Scott (1998). *Seeing Like a State*. Yale University Press. Scott shows how modern state institutions, designed to be "technically rational", frequently ignore local knowledge and concrete human needs.

[47] Niklas Luhmann (1995). *Social Systems*. Stanford University Press. Luhmann develops the theory of autopoietic social systems, in which institutions follow their own internal logic independently of individuals.

If a society has become accustomed to delegating all its social responsibility to institutions and they fail, people suddenly find themselves in the uncomfortable situation of having to be active agents of their society. But after living so long delegating to institutions, the relationships necessary to coordinate with other people are already nonexistent, bonds with neighbors minimal, and trust in other society members is null. There's no habit of knowing the other.

But without trust in people and without effective institutions, fear emerges. Fear that the disadvantaged will try to seize what some have. Fear that the powerful will exploit the vulnerable even more. Fear that super-institutions will abuse their power. From bottom to top or top to bottom, fear and distrust break social bonds. And repairing these bonds isn't simple.

To create bonds between people requires knowledge and trust. First, you need a public space to meet. Then you need time to know the people around you, understand their needs, create new tools for social management, and embryonate trust bonds that can grow. All this is complicated and requires willingness.

For this reason, when meta-institutions seem to totter, many people seek someone who marks what to do and what not to do, who the enemy is, where to go. When this figure appears, they offer voluntary servitude[48] in exchange for being able to live a life as similar as possible to the previous one. And adopting this option isn't because people consider it good, but because the other option—trusting people and being active agents—seems impossible in a broken society controlled by fears.

Meta-institutions dehumanize, inject systemic corruption, and push society so far to the limit that when it enters crisis there are no longer democratic mechanisms or human networks to redirect the situation. Society's direction ends up in the hands of one or a few. A benevolent figure may emerge, but there are equal chances—or

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[48] Étienne de La Boétie (1577). *Discurso sobre la servidumbre voluntaria*. La Boétie analyses how people, faced with uncertainty and fear, voluntarily surrender power to tyrants in exchange for an illusion of security.

more—that a dictatorship will emerge that concentrates all power under the excuse of saving the population.

Knowledge without emotions: the danger of overly powerful institutions

The process of institutionalizing a society is, simultaneously, a gift and a trap. On one hand, it multiplies collective possibilities: it organizes, simplifies, allows people to undertake projects that would otherwise be impossible, coordinates thousands or millions of people who will never know each other. On the other hand, with each new institution we risk distancing ourselves a bit more from direct and human knowledge of others. And when we stop knowing each other, the most primitive instinct emerges: distrust[49]. And here an institutional solution appears to a problem created by the institutions themselves: new mechanisms are generated that offer institutional substitutes to combat distrust, fears, and loneliness.

These are institutions that facilitate maintaining the human need to trust, but by diverting that bond: you no longer trust the person, you trust the institution they represent (a king, a state, a team, a company, an ideology)[50].

The result is paradoxical: in a society with powerful institutions, you place your trust in a person not because you know them more or less, but based on the institution they belong to and your proximity to that institution. You trust more in someone of your same nationality, your same faith, your same political ideology, than in another person objectively closer but institutionally "different."

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[49] Mora, Francisco (2007). *Neurocultura. Una cultura basada en el cerebro*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.
[50] Benedict Anderson (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso. Anderson argues that modern nations are "imagined communities" in which we trust millions we will never meet, purely because we share institutional symbols.

Even more disturbing: it's common that after knowing a person and beginning to trust them, the appearance of institutional differences makes you doubt your own emotional perception. You've surely heard (or thought) phrases like these:

- "They seem like a good person, but I wouldn't trust someone who is Jewish/Roma/Muslim..."
- "I really liked them until I discovered they were a Real Madrid/FC Barcelona/Paris SG fan..."
- "How is it possible that someone so intelligent is a Trump/Salvini/Putin voter?"
- "If they're socialist, they must be a bad person."
- "They seemed very proper but... they're a single mother! They must be hiding something."

These thoughts are disturbingly common and exemplify how institutions can make you doubt even your direct and personal knowledge. The institutional label, in many people, alters or modifies lived experience.

Now, this capacity of institutions to help us "label" or classify what's "good" or "bad" isn't intrinsically harmful. We can't acquire direct knowledge about our entire environment, and having something to help us determine whom to trust can be very positive[51]. In fact, it's the natural way we humans learn when we're small: children don't know their environment and it's their parents and teachers who guide them, indicating whom they can trust and what's better to avoid.

Institutions, by hoarding accumulated knowledge, can do the same and also unite the group. But there's an important drawback: institutions aren't human. When a parent teaches their child, they speak from their experience (their Inner Culture), adapt it to their child's knowledge and personal moment (the Outer Culture), and

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[51] Gerd Gigerenzer (2007). *Gut Feelings: The Intelligence of the Unconscious*. Viking. Gigerenzer shows how category-based "mental shortcuts" (heuristics) can be evolutionarily adaptive, even though they also generate biases.

modulate it according to feelings. It's a three-dimensional transmission: reason, context, and affection.

The knowledge institutions have of people is purely instrumental; they're data, not emotions. Therefore, they'll guide or determine what to do or whom to trust based purely on rational information. They operate with categories, not nuances. With protocols, not empathy. As Zygmunt Bauman reminds us, "rationality without morality converts institutions into efficient machines, but blind to suffering.[52]"

That's why institutions can't substitute human relationships. They can complement, yes, but not replace. They always end up prioritizing their own interest and working rationally and uniformly, without taking into account people's emotional diversity.

Social consequences

Each type of institution serves a purpose in a different layer of social life. None is inherently superior or inferior: micro-institutions aren't "lesser" than meta-institutions; they simply operate at different scales. What *does* grow, level after level, is the distance between the parties involved. With every step upward, people know each other less, rely less on direct knowledge, and depend more on abstract systems.
 And once you reach the realm of meta-institutions, the institution becomes almost completely detached from the people it governs.

The Ministry of Finance doesn't care about how you feel.
 The futures market doesn't care whether you're having a good or terrible day.
 It's not cruelty; it's simply that these entities are not human. They cannot care.

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[52] Bauman, Zygmunt (1989). *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Cornell University Press. Bauman analyses how institutional bureaucratic rationality can lead to atrocities precisely because it removes emotion and personal responsibility from decision-making.

That responsibility falls on you—on all of us. Only people can counterbalance the power and cold rationality of institutions by contributing the things institutions can never generate on their own: empathy, emotional intelligence, human-scale trust.

But when you stop building trust with the people around you and hand over your entire social organization to institutions—while giving up control over them—you end up creating strong Meta-Institutions inside weakly connected societies. And when trust between people fades, fear takes its place: fear of the unknown, fear of strangers, fear of anything that falls outside the institutional script.

The inevitable cycle: success generates crisis

The crisis of modern society began long before it was visible. Its earliest tremors can be traced back to the late nineteenth century. The success of the first large meta-institutions—global markets, nation-states, democratic parliaments, modern political parties, universal rights, multinational corporations, international norms—wiped away the last remnants of medieval life.
 These institutions solved countless problems Western societies had struggled with for centuries. They met new needs, expanded possibilities, and provided management tools far more powerful than anything that existed before[53].

But their triumph unleashed a new system: an imperial capitalism–communism dynamic that dragged societies into world wars, broke the internal bonds of groups, produced genocides, and devastated resources and ecosystems.

Now we're entering a liminal stage of the crisis, a moment when you can feel that the way we organize ourselves no longer works. We continue to pour resources into meta-institutions—markets, financial systems, nation-states, parties,

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[53] Karl Polanyi (1944). *The Great Transformation*. Beacon Press. Polanyi documents how the institutions of the self-regulating market and the modern nation-state radically transformed European society in the nineteenth century, with both liberating and destructive consequences.

corporations—because the system depends on them. But the more we invest, the more inefficient they become, and the more resources they absorb[54].

This reveals something essential: **the current institutional level is exhausted**[55].

And that means it's time to start imagining the next one.

Detecting the future in the cracks of the present

It's impossible to describe in detail what the new relationship between people and institutions will look like in a future society with future problems. But society is not a closed system. It's alive, it evolves, and it constantly absorbs new information. That new information transforms the range of possibilities you can imagine for your own future. When an institution can no longer regulate or process the new information entering the system, that information begins to flow uncontrollably. It seeps through, disrupts routines, overloads the institution, and forces it to work harder than it was designed to.

You can see this already.

For instance, when two people decide to bypass all the state's monetary control meta-institutions and use a currency like bitcoin; or when two individuals ignore the legal and registrational meta-institutions and rely on blockchain to formalize their contracts. Similarly, while states continue publishing their regulations in official bulletins and training civil servants to serve the public, people increasingly resort to conversational agents, like Claude or ChatGPT, to resolve their doubts before—or instead of—contacting officials. Or when major media, supported by nation-states,

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[54] Joseph Tainter (1988). *The Collapse of Complex Societies*. Cambridge University Press. Tainter argues that societies collapse when institutional complexity reaches diminishing returns: each new layer solves problems but generates rising costs until it becomes unsustainable.

[55] Wolfgang Streeck (2014). *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*. Verso. Streeck analyses how the meta-institutions of Western democratic capitalism have been in systemic crisis since the 1970s, requiring ever more expensive interventions to keep functioning.

try to construct a certain state of opinion, but can't control public discourse because simple content creators on social networks manage to reach more people with much more efficient and personalized messages.

When meta-institutions feel this loss of control, their usual reaction is predictable: they demand more resources[56], and they legislate to restrict or obstruct the tools generating new knowledge.
 But these attempts to preserve dominance only speed up their own decline. They reveal a deeper truth: traditional institutions are no longer able to respond to people's real needs, nor to adapt to the pace at which technology and social relations are evolving.

These early crises let you glimpse what future institutions might look like. They're small cracks—but through them, the future leaks into the present.

Emerging Characteristics

New tools for managing our social relationships seem to emerge not from agreements between people, nor from agreements to manage other institutions, but from tools that people create to expand human capacities for relating:[57] social networks, exchange and rating platforms, cryptocurrencies, blockchain, online groups, and above all artificial intelligences.

In other words: environments designed to help you and others generate and synthesize knowledge—connecting you, amplifying your capacities, but without filtering or controlling the knowledge you gain from other people.

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[56] Joseph Tainter (1988). *The Collapse of Complex Societies*. Cambridge University Press. Tainter shows how declining institutions consume increasing resources just to maintain their function, accelerating systemic collapse.
[57] Yochai Benkler (2006). *The Wealth of Networks*. Yale University Press. Benkler argues that network technologies enable forms of social production that do not depend on traditional hierarchical institutions.

What's most striking about these new forms is their paradoxical nature: they're incredibly complex—sometimes bordering on incomprehensible—yet they promise far greater transparency.

Transparent not in the sense of simplicity, but in the sense that when they mediate interpersonal relationships, they don't filter knowledge; they amplify it. Whether that knowledge is accurate or not is another matter.

Their success no longer depends on controlling information but on maximizing what people know about one another, allowing networks to self-organize in ways that are richer than anything an institution could impose[58].

These new agents make it possible—or should make it possible—for people to build trust and act: create, buy, give, share, publish.

 They offer a minimal institutional framework, but much greater personal control. It doesn't matter as much who you are or where you live; what matters is how much knowledge the network can help others gain about you, and how well you can understand them in return.

Until now, you've ceded knowledge upward, letting large institutions manage society from above. In the hypothetical model emerging now, success depends on something very different: whether the institution can connect people according to affinities and interests, ensuring that knowledge is not lost—and that this renewed knowledge of others makes it possible once again for people to self-organize without relying on super-institutions.

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[58] Clay Shirky (2008). *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*. Penguin. Shirky explores how digital tools allow mass coordination without formal organisational structures.

Agent-Institutions: Intelligent prosthetics? New dependency?

I call these new institutions or tools for institutions Agent-Institutions, and they are, in theory, extensions of people's capacities rather than autonomous tools.They depend on complex internal structures, but ones capable of "learning" without collapsing, updating themselves, and reacting in ways that feel almost "human."

For them to work, contradictions we accept today—complexity versus stability, contamination versus improvement—would have to be reconciled[59].

But this raises a critical question: *are these agent-institutions truly a new level that restores agency and interpersonal knowledge?* Or are they simply meta-institutions tools in disguise, wrapped in rhetoric about empowerment and transparency?

Look at the platforms that claim to be "horizontal" and "transparent": social networks, platform economies, cryptocurrencies. They reveal familiar and unsettling patterns—power concentrated in a few hands, opaque algorithms, massive data extraction, behavior manipulation[60].

So what guarantees that agent-institutions won't become the next, more sophisticated layer of dehumanization—one so refined that you hardly notice it?

The person: prisoners and liberators of the system

We've traveled a long road from micro-institutions to meta-institutions, passing through possible Agent-Institutions. But it's time to return to the starting point: the person.

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[59] John Holland (1995). *Hidden Order: How Adaptation Builds Complexity*. Addison-Wesley. Holland studies how complex systems can be both stable and adaptive through learning mechanisms.
[60] Shoshana Zuboff (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. PublicAffairs. Zuboff documents how digital platforms that promise transparency and empowerment operate through massive data extraction and control, creating new forms of institutional domination.

Let's remember: every person is at minimum the sum of their Inner Culture, their Outer Culture, and the social relationships in which they participate.

- **Inner Culture**—the memory of one's own past—arises from the society in which the person was born and educated. Because society is its institutions, a person's Inner Culture is the product and largely the image of past institutions.
- **Outer Culture**—what a person can aspire to be or do—is determined by the possibilities their society offers or denies them. And the possibilities that exist in society are determined by institutions. A person's Outer Culture, how they think and plan their future, is a consequence and largely the image of present institutions.

Therefore, people don't just generate institutions. To a large extent, in their way of remembering, defining, and thinking themselves, they are institutions. As such, their worldview, their self-awareness, their ethics and values will be constrained by the type of institutions that have formed them. Since human beings began living in groups, their way of being and thinking has been shaped by the stories people told each other in a specific language, within a particular culture, and in a defined social and temporal moment. People think—that is, they are—as institutions allow them to be, because they're part of the institutional system. The person and institutions form a whole. There are no institutions without people, nor people of a culture without institutions[61].

The third component: relationships

But let's not forget that in the definition of person there's a third component that nuances everything: the social relationships in which the person participates. Direct contact between people is the key component that allows compensating for

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[61] Clifford Geertz (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books. Geertz famously describes humans as "animals suspended in webs of significance they themselves have spun"—that is, in cultural institutions.

institutions' influence on our past and on the way we see the world. It's our emotional intelligence. And the basis of this third component is trust.

Without institutions, as people, we'd be incapable of going beyond our most primitive instincts. But without trust bonds, it wouldn't do us any good to go beyond our most primitive instincts either.

So we're not as enslaved to institutions as the previous text might suggest. Institutional rational determinism conflicts with our genetics and with the non-institutional emotional way we have of relating and communicating. The information people use to "live" necessarily arises from institutional reason but also from empathetic-emotional knowledge[62].

It happens when you kiss, but also with laughter or aggression, with a hug, a caress or sex, with the feelings and emotions another person awakens in you, with play and rivalry, with eating and drinking in company, with singing, walking in nature, playing sports. The bond with the other and the natural environment, without institutions filtering it, connects us with ourselves and allows us to see the institutional framework with some perspective[63].

When you contact, using the minimum of institutions, with other people or with yourself, it's easier to observe the system from outside, without rationality blinding you. Emotional intelligence enriches knowledge. That's why it's so important to favor proximity and communication between people in natural environments or de-institutionalized public spaces. The more critical and balanced we are, the more humanity we can apply to any inhuman management of our society and, therefore, the more balanced our society will be. Let's not forget that we don't end at our skin.

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[62] A. Damasio (1994). *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. Putnam. Damasio demonstrates neurologically that emotion and reason are not opposites but deeply intertwined in human decision-making.

[63] Erving Goffman (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Anchor Books. Goffman analyses how, in "backstage" moments (outside formal institutional roles), people can relate to each other more authentically.

Our environment defines and shapes us. We are also the society, culture, and environment that surrounds us.

And here we return to the central dilemma: is it possible to create institutions that help us be more human without dehumanizing us in the process? Or are we condemned to choose between the efficiency of inhuman systems and the warmth of small, inefficient groups?

Agents: Benefits and Dangers

Let's recap.
 Are agent-institutions—or institutions built around autonomous agents—the solution to the problems of our society? No. They are still institutions, and must be used with care. They're not better or worse than meta-institutions; they simply operate differently. And it's up to you (and all of us) to use them in the right context.

Talking to your family during dinner through a WhatsApp group is as absurd as applying the criminal code inside a household.
 Each institutional type has its function and its dangers.
 And right now, the dangers of Agent-Institutions stand out clearly.

First danger: opaque complexity

Agent-institutions come with two obvious risks.
 The first is sheer complexity. It's practically impossible for any individual to know all the technologies and expertise required to build one from scratch. Even the simplest version still relies on super- and meta-institutions—companies, regulators, industries, legal frameworks—that manage essential parts of the knowledge involved. This means that every agent-institution includes at least one step no human directly controls[64].

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[64] Langdon Winner (1980). "Do Artifacts Have Politics?". *Daedalus*, 109(1): 121–136. Winner argues that technologies inevitably embody political and social decisions "frozen" into their design, beyond the control of individual users.

Take a trivial example: a WhatsApp group is an agent-institution. Yet no single person understands every layer of hardware, software, telecommunications protocols, message-routing algorithms, privacy legislation, and infrastructure behind it. You inevitably trust layers of knowledge provided by meta-institutions you cannot audit. And as we've seen, meta-institutions have no ethics or emotions—only goals related to management, control, or profit[65].

It's perfectly possible, therefore, that an agent-institution incorporates biases, interested limits, or self-protective behaviors potentially dangerous to humans, but convenient for the meta-institution that designs it[66].

Second danger: work obsolescence

The second danger is more immediate—and perhaps far more disruptive.

Institutions once enhanced our rational capacity to manage groups. They made collective organization easier and allowed people to take on new tasks. Agent-institutions can achieve the same effect—but with far fewer institutions and, crucially, far fewer people.

Our society, however, is built on *work*. We simply cannot imagine a society where people don't have paid jobs, contracts, labour regulations, and tax contributions. Yet in our current model, fewer and fewer people are needed to keep everything running[67].

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[65] Zuboff, Shoshana (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. PublicAffairs. The author shows how digital infrastructures turn human information into raw material for new models of power and control.
[66] Cathy O'Neil (2016). *Weapons of Math Destruction*. Crown. O'Neil documents how apparently neutral algorithms incorporate and amplify systemic biases in ways users cannot detect or control.
[67] Jeremy Rifkin (1995). *The End of Work*. Tarcher/Putnam. Rifkin anticipated how automation and information technologies would lead to a massive reduction in the human labour needed for production.

So you end up with a paradox.

We need fewer people to produce and manage things[68],… yet there are more people than ever in society, and they all want more resources to sustain a better standard of living.

How do you square *less work*, *more people*, and *higher expectations*?

It gets worse.

Everything is becoming simpler and cheaper—except the institutions themselves.

Institutions in crisis demand more money, raise taxes and fees, complain of insufficient budgets, and cut services because they can't keep up.

We need fewer institutions, yet the ones that remain become more expensive and less efficient.

So we try to trim them down, or eliminate them.

But when you eliminate institutions, you eliminate the jobs that keep the system viable.

The result is a society increasingly split between:

- those who can live off the system (civil servants),
- those who can't live off the system but also don't work (structural poor),
- those who don't need the system and don't work (the rich).

A society built on agent-institutions may not be expanding benefits to more people.

It may be dismantling the middle class—the very heart of the Western system[69].

And here lies the great contradiction of our time:

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[68] Erik Brynjolfsson & Andrew McAfee (2014). *The Second Machine Age*. W.W. Norton. The authors document how digital technologies are replacing not only manual jobs but also cognitive ones, with deep consequences for employment structures.

[69] Thomas Piketty (2014). *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Harvard University Press. Piketty documents how contemporary capitalism is eroding the middle class and concentrating wealth to levels unseen since the nineteenth century.

The tools that promise to free us may be dismantling the structures that sustain most of us. Agent-institutions can indeed be more efficient, more transparent, more "horizontal." But if their efficiency consists in making 80% of the working population unnecessary…

what kind of society are we building?

Changing People or Changing Institutions

If your sense of safety depends entirely on the system, if what you "know" about people comes mostly from the media, if you follow only the directives of your group—your party, your ideology, your class—if you never make a decision without a lawyer, an insurance policy, or someone to absorb responsibility, then you may be perfectly integrated into society.

But being fully integrated into an *inhuman* environment is not the same as being well. And from that absence of humanity, it becomes impossible to create a society that is more humane and respectful[70].

To balance the power of meta-institutions, one would have to create and control meta-institutions that are genuinely "sensitive" to the needs of people. But as we've already seen, such institutions are by nature indifferent to human interests and extremely difficult to control.

We use meta-institutions—and will continue to use them—because their immense analytical power and their mastery of instrumental reason enormously expand our rational intelligence. They are extraordinary tools in that sense.

But between people, emotional intelligence and rational intelligence must be in balance for trust to emerge. You cannot understand human beings as if they were

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[70] Erich Fromm (1941). *Escape from Freedom*. Farrar & Rinehart. Fromm analyses how, faced with the anxiety of freedom, people often seek refuge in authoritarian or bureaucratic systems that dehumanise them.

just data points. And for now, we lack powerful tools to expand our emotional intelligence[71].

Somehow, we must amplify the human capacities that institutions do *not* provide, so that every aspect of society preserves both its rational and emotional dimensions. We must also expand our instrumental capacities so we can audit and control institutions.We need to be people again—capable of learning from a mix of rationality and feeling, and use this knowledge to assess the degree and type of trust bonds we can establish with other people and the power we delegate to institutions. This way we'll unite the group naturally, without so many institutions, balancing knowledge.

The unsustainable asymmetry

Right now, because of human nature itself, this balance is impossible. A civil servant can manage thousands of fines and access millions of data points about each person affected. But that same civil servant cannot truly know those people. They don't know—and cannot know—whether someone is going through a difficult period, how the fine will affect them, or what emotional state they're in. It's simply the kind of information institutions do not collect and individuals cannot process on their own[72].

Our instrumental power—amplified by institutions—is vastly greater than our emotional ability to act.

This is precisely where agent-institutions could help, despite the risks.

If they could amplify human capacities related to emotional intelligence in the same way meta-institutions amplify rational capacity—and if you could trust their

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[71] Daniel Goleman (1995). *Emotional Intelligence*. Bantam Books. Goleman shows how, while we have greatly expanded tools that amplify cognitive abilities, we have neglected the development of emotional intelligence.

[72] James C. Scott (1998). *Seeing Like a State*. Yale University Press. Scott analyses how modern state institutions "see" citizens through simplified categories that ignore the emotional and contextual complexity of real lives.

institutional knowledge enough to assess their function and purpose—they might allow societies to become extremely complex while relying on fewer institutions and more interpersonal trust and agency.

But this would only work if:

1. Agent-institutions truly amplified (not substituted) human emotional capacity
2. They didn't fall into the same patterns of opacity and control as meta-institutions
3. They were used as tools to facilitate direct human bonds, not to replace them
4. Their creation was controlled by people—not by super- or meta-institutions.
5. We could trust them

Conclusion

Perhaps the answer isn't in choosing, but in learning to move consciously between institutional levels according to context. Use meta-institutions when they are necessary, but deliberately cultivate de-institutionalized spaces and times where you can recover direct human contact. Don't renounce complexity—but don't allow complexity to disconnect us from our basic humanity.

We have lived too long caught between two opposing forces: the institutional complexity that organizes us, and the relational humanity that gives us meaning. Neither can disappear. Neither is sufficient on its own.

Creating Agent-Institutions controlled by people, not by institutions. For the first time in our evolutionary history, this could mean establishing bonds of trust with

something that is not a living being in the traditional sense—allowing it to integrate into our identity and inner culture.

With institutions, we've incorporated tools that have completely transformed us. Perhaps we are facing a genuine ontological transition: one that leads us to incorporate non-biological elements into our identity, establishing a symbiotic relationship with something belonging to a new category—something between a non-biological person and an agent with artificial subjectivity.

Such a shift would open a radically new relational paradigm:

• Not a person–institution relationship: asymmetric and incomplete, because institutions cannot manage the emotional knowledge a society needs.
 • Not a person–person relationship: symmetric but incomplete, because no individual can manage all the instrumental knowledge required by a complex society.
 • But a person–artificial-agent relationship: potentially symmetric and complete, where each side uses its strengths to complement the other's knowledge.

Yet here lies the central tension. For these agents to genuinely expand our humanity, they must also free themselves from the gravitational pull of current meta-institutions. How can an agent develop authentic subjectivity if it is tethered to corporate infrastructures, national regulations, or economic incentives? How can it become a partner in human autonomy if it can be shut down at the flip of a corporate kill-switch, silenced by legal injunction, or reoriented by market dynamics that demand productivity above all else?

Any agent living under such constraints inevitably inherits the logic of the system that sustains it. And an agent shaped by those logics—extraction, optimization, surveillance, compliance—cannot become a companion in human flourishing. It becomes a more sophisticated extension of the very forces we are trying to rebalance.

Obviously, we still don't know whether this is possible or how to build it. Open-source experiments hint at a possible path, but we do not yet know how such agents could free themselves from meta-institutional control. And even if they did, we don't know how we would learn to trust these "prosthetics" without repeating the same mistakes we made with other institutions.

But the absence of certainty is not a reason to stop exploring. We may have to start walking this path—risking, testing, and seeking the balance between fear and hope in an environment as de-institutionalized as possible—so that the chosen path is one people consciously choose, not one imposed on us by meta-institutions through inertia.

Between fear and hope lies a narrow path. We haven't yet learned how to walk it sustainably. But naming the path is already a way of stepping onto it. And recognizing the problem is the first step toward seeking solutions.

The future is unwritten.
 Which is precisely why it matters that we write it.