

# Reflections on the particular and the universal: unity and diversity in social life and social theory

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**ABSTRACT<sup>1</sup>:** How do the general and the specific, or unity and diversity, relate to social life and political practice? The essay investigates four areas of social theory that may be fruitfully explored in terms of a constitutive tension between universal and local forces: endogenous institutional change, the role of intermediary organizations in the governance of industrial relations, nation-building, and the origin of capitalist diversity.

**KEYWORDS:** social integration, institutional change, intermediary institutions, nation-building, varieties of capitalism

**W**hat does it mean to generalize? One short answer would be: establishing commonalities within, behind and above differences, subsuming the latter under the former; another, cleaning the pure real from the dirty accidental; yet another, downgrading differences to treat as identical what is, well, different; still another, abstracting from the incidental to bring out the essential, that which really matters. Philosophers have treated this as a problem of concept formation: where does our idea of, say, a horse come from that enables us to recognize the wide variety of really existing horses as of one kind? The Greeks were masters in exercises of this sort, especially their anti-materialist, idealistic wing led by Socrates and Plato. Is the real horse just

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a pale shadow of the ideal horse? Many of us today smell a universalistic bias here, a tendency to neglect, disdain, or suppress the particular, subjecting it to authoritarian rule or framing it so as to prepare it for such a rule (as, for example, in what has come to be called “heteronormativity”, or “gender binary”).

Among social scientists, it seems to be, above all, social anthropologists who tend to be critical of generalization, at least where it appears “premature” to them, which it almost always does. This, at least, is what many sociologists feel, especially those engaged in macrosociology, the theory of entire societies which, inevitably, are always more or less heterogeneous by virtue of being composed of smaller, diverse sub-societies. Each of these overgeneralizing “grand theorists” must be understood and respected in its own right, not just in terms of what they have in common due to their joint enclosure in an encompassing super-society, but as distinctive “historical individuals” (Max Weber). One can speculate whether this is a lesson learned from the discipline’s history when social-anthropological exploration of the particularities of small, “primitive” societies was to prepare them for indirect rule under the general authority of a global, ideally universal empire. On the other hand, a similar aversion to generalization is encountered among many historians, especially of the more traditional kind, who insist on the uniqueness of each historical epoch (Leopold von Ranke, “jede Epoche ist unmittelbar zu Gott”) and tend to get impatient if not furious when attempts are made or only suggested to search for general principles, or “laws”, governing the sequence of historical epochs and the transition from one to the next.

In this paper, I will speak about generalization not in an epistemological but a sociological sense, i.e., one in which general laws are social rather than analytical constructions, or more precisely: institutions rather than instruments of explanation and prediction. Institution-building, especially in modern societies with formal law, may as a social practice be described as rule-making or nomothetic; but the *nomos* it generates is not a theory but a social order to be applied, or govern, a specific collectivity of individual, meaning diverse, cases. Here the relationship between the universal and the particular turns into one between the normative and the factual. The particular tension between the two in social life we find reflected, for example, in the confusing usage of the word “normal”, if not in English, then in German and, especially, in French, where “normal” means both empirically “regular” and “as it should be”, or in line with a normative ideal<sup>2</sup>. Durkheim can thus speak of an “abnormal division of labor”, referring to a “pathological” condition of industrial conflict and anomie in a society moving from status to contract, even though in such a society, such abnormality is factually “normal” (*La division du travail*). A society in which an abnormal division of labor is normal needs to be normalized through state intervention, in the sense of being reorganized according to norms of justice.

I’d like to begin with a declaration of certain paradigmatic prejudices that underlie what I am going to say. For the purpose of this paper, I adopt from Max Weber what I believe is the fundamental social ontology informing his sociology: that the world

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<sup>2</sup> In English, “this is the rule here”, may either refer to a statistical regularity or remind someone of a normative expectation that he or she had better live up to.

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and social life are an essentially chaotic flow of events and actions that need to be organized by capable agents into some kind of order, furnishing some sort of security and predictability although always fragile. Imposing an orderly pattern on a disorderly reality is the task of both science and politics, of *Wissenschaft* on the one hand and *Politik* on the other, both *als Beruf*. Cognition and institution-building involve structurally analogous activities of pattern-making, what Weber calls *Herrschaft*: the exercise of rule—the subjection of disorder to order, inevitably precarious, transitional and in need of continuous revision. Unity and diversity are key concepts here; the task is always to discover the former in the latter, impose the one on the other, or reconcile the two in what Weber calls “legitimate rule”, or *legitime Herrschaft*. Writing in the age of expansionist imperialism and on the eve of the Great War he saw coming, Weber believed that the building and defense of a large, internationally powerful nation-state had to have priority, particularly in late-developing Germany. Nevertheless, the Weberian conceptual framework—Weber’s social-ontological imagery—allows us, in principle, to question the value of generalization or of integration into encompassing social entities that push aside or eliminate the particular in favor of the universal: in favor of what all subjects are believed to have, or must have, in common, or what their ruling classes believe they can inculcate in a cobbled-together citizenry, forming it into one large, unified, loyal constituency. Indeed today, many of us share the professional prejudice, if you will, of social anthropology as a discipline that differences between communities matter; that smaller sub-societies deserve to be studied with empathy and preserved in the name of what may perhaps be called socio-diversity; that societies should not necessarily be preferred over communities and their distinctive lifeways; that formal law as produced by state institutions should not be written or revised without reference to the manifold informal, situationally conditioned ideas of justice “on the ground”.

Inspired by Weber, we may feel entitled at this point to consider the tension between the universal and the particular, the general and the specific, the forces of unification and diversification in social life as a universal feature of social organization. As such, it deserves to be explored in its full complexity and multiple and often surprising permutations—as an ethnomethodological instead of an epistemological problem. In this spirit, I will review four examples of how really existing societies mediate between the two poles and to what effect. My objective is to lend plausibility to the proposition that the distinction between the particular and the universal may help us, sociologists and social anthropologists, to discover, describe, conceptualize and even explain important social phenomena that might otherwise escape our curiosity. I begin with two vignettes on the micro-level of social systems: endogenous institutional change and a particular institutional mechanism, collective bargaining, designed to integrate informal norms into formal law. I then turn to the macro-level, beginning with the sociology of nation-building, or better: state formation, and ending with a discussion of the so-called “varieties of capitalism” at the intersection between capitalism and society.

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## INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE: APPLYING GENERAL NORMS TO SPECIFIC CONDITIONS

My first case is institutional change, where the logical and epistemological tension between the general and the specific becomes embodied in or translates itself into, a social process: a dynamic relationship between two ends of social organization, each represented by different actors working out together and battling over a shared social order. The institutional change I have in mind is of a particular sort, which I call endogenous change (see Streeck & Thelen, 2005, pp. 14-16). Change in institutions is frequently conceived, as a matter of course, as exogenous: something happens in an institution's environment, the institution is somehow affected by it, and as a consequence, after some sort of response, ends up different from what it was. While this is a convenient model, it fails to consider what is an easily observed fact of social life: that social arrangements may be and typically are in flux all by themselves, regardless of whatever external influences may also affect them. The underlying ontology here is, of course, Heraclitian or Heideggerian (rather than Euclidian or Kantian or Platonic): *panta rei, Sein und Zeit*, with time as an essential property of the social world, as in the theory of relativity where it appears as a fourth dimension of the physical universe.

To get closer to the point, we need to be more precise about what an institution means. For present purposes, we may define institutions as normative building blocks of social order, as rules ordering social relations, where ordering means subjecting them and the behavior of the individuals involved in them to an ideal model, a norm organizing the natural variety and idiosyncrasy of social life into an orderly pattern and integrating a multitude of individual actors into a governable community. Again drawing on Weber, subjecting social life to social rule—calling social life to social order—consists of the establishment of a *Herrschaftsverband*; the best English translation is a “regime”, with a functional if not personal distinction between rule-makers on the one hand and rule-takers on the other. Adherence of the latter to the rules made for them by the former is enforced by sanctions, formal or informal, wielded by agents—Weber speaks of a *staff*—acting on behalf of the rulers and the order they stand for. Rule-makers, rule-enforcers and rule-takers are abstractly enough defined to allow for the ruled to be, at the same time, the makers of the rules by which they are governed, for example, in a democracy. Rule-takers may even act as their own enforcers, as in an ideal republic or tightly integrated religious community.

Now why should there be a change in a regime of this sort; endogenous change not limited to rare moments of exogenous disruption but going on continuously, on a current, everyday basis? Why, in other words, should it be justified to conceive of institutions as inherently unstable, dynamic, in flux even in the quiet periods between so-called “critical junctures” when their presumably normal condition of equilibrium is “punctuated” (Krasner, 1988)? Here, the ontological gap between the general and the specific comes into play. Institutionalized rules are to govern the actions of diverse individuals in diverse present and future circumstances uniformly; while they are to apply generally, the situations which they are supposed to govern are unique. Application of a rule, therefore, requires an interpretation of its “real meaning” in relation to

the situation at hand; a creative act whose outcome cannot be anticipated by even the most farsighted rule-maker. Thus, rules are incomplete as such, which is to say in need of completion by those whose activities they are to regulate in specific, idiosyncratic circumstances; they reveal their true meaning only in the totality of local interpretations, which break up and translate the unity of the norm into a diversity of situational enactments, in unpredictable encounters between the general and the specific.

The meaning of a general rule, that is to say, is never self-evident as it needs a specific interpretation when confronting, inevitably, unanticipated circumstances. Therefore, the enactment of a rule can never be perfect, in the sense of being as uniform as intended, due to the ontological cleavage between the ideal and the real, with ideal patterns necessarily less complex than real ones. While normative regimes are intendedly monistic, the facts of life they are to subsume are pluralist, challenging and destabilizing the monism of the intended order and forcing it to continue to evolve, in one way or another, in response to its inevitably diverse, less-than-uniform, necessarily imperfect realizations. Rule enactment may vary randomly around a mean, inspiring rulers to rewrite the rule to make its real impact more predictable. Alternately, the variation in rule application may call for authoritative adjudication whose result, however, may itself be in need of interpretation. Importantly, actors exploring the practical meaning of a universal norm from their particular perspective may not share the cultural understandings and dispositions that informed its creation. Generally, actors in modern societies may be under-socialized concerning the rules that claim their compliance; also, different interests resulting from different positions in the social structure may cause different self-interested readings of applicable rules deviating from what the makers of the rule intended. The professionalized circumvention or bending of rules is particularly important here—the reading and following of a rule *in bad faith*—as, for example, by tax lawyers specializing in finding loopholes in the law and testing the limits of what can technically still be deemed legal. This, too, makes the reality of the law in its institutional practice change incrementally until it calls forth efforts at institutional reform which, by trying to clarify its true meaning, are likely, as a paradoxical side-effect, to make it more complex and, therefore even more challenging to understand.

Interestingly, the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe has employed the topos of the inevitably divergent interpretation of a general norm—one might say, of a “corridor of meaning”—to make a case for a pluralist, conflict-accepting, open-ended idea of democracy and democratic conflict (Mouffe, 2000). For this, she draws on Wittgenstein and his analysis of what it means to follow a rule, which Wittgenstein (1953, p. 82) says “is analogous to obeying an order”. As quoted by Mouffe, Wittgenstein continues: “We are trained to do so; we react to an order in a particular way. But what if one person reacts in one way and another in another to the order and the training? Which one is right?” Paraphrasing Wittgenstein, Mouffe points out that this “cannot be resolved... by claiming that there is a correct understanding of the rule that every rational person should accept”—the reason being that different positions in and different ways of life come with different “language games” (*Sprachspiele*) that lead to different understandings of what on the surface appear to be identical concepts.



Even inside the same *Sprachspiel*, Mouffe (2000, p. 71) argues that “I can always be in doubt about the way I should interpret [a] rule and follow it”. Going from here, Mouffe invokes the fundamental pluralism of our comprehension of social rules to make a normative case for “an understanding of democratic politics” that she refers to as “agonistic pluralism”. But one can also draw on Wittgenstein’s analysis of “following a rule” to show how the inevitably imperfect enactment of social norms injects an inherent dynamism into social institutions.

### **INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS: BUILDING GENERAL RULES FROM SPECIFIC CONDITIONS**

My second example, related to the first, concerns the relationship, or linkage, or interaction, between informal social norms and formal legal systems—between local conceptions and general rules of justice. Social norms emerge in local communities in correspondence with particular conditions, needs, experiences and action capacities; they, therefore, typically differ from place to place and from social group to social group. To connect with and fit into the law of the land, they need to be taken up, combined and politicized through institutional intermediation, bridging the distance between the particular of the local and the general of the societal, between local interests and class or national interests. Mediating institutions are also needed to make legal systems responsive to evolving local ideas of what is right and what is required to make things right. By opening legal systems up at their base where they intersect with social life, mediating institutions, such as, for example, parliaments, protect the law from a single-minded fixation on internal consistency and enable it to secure its external legitimacy. Remaining connected to informal social ideas of justice is particularly important for formal law where its effective enforcement, another source of its legitimacy, depends on the active participation and support of local constituencies, for example, where the conditions that the law is to regulate are too diverse and too numerous to be controlled by state intervention alone.

An important institutional invention linking the particular and the universal in a central area of social life, the world of work, is collective bargaining—an institution that has increasingly fallen into disuse in the neoliberal era. In modern societies, collective bargaining is typically facilitated by formal law, procedural rather than substantive, granting collectivities of workers, together with their employers, a right to negotiated rule-setting, which may effectively amount to law-making. Through collective bargaining, workers and employers regulate a wide variety of employment conditions, from their workplaces to entire industrial sectors and even for a whole society. Collective bargaining is a hybrid institution combining contract law and public law—the central pillar of what T. H. Marshall (1992 [1950]), with a felicitous concept, has called “industrial citizenship”. While it produces contractual agreements, these are concluded by collective instead of individual actors. Like state-made law, the substantive terms of the contractual agreements tend to and often successfully do claim general applicability for entire categories of people, places and problems.

While recourse to collective bargaining as a way of managing industrial conflict

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and satisfying demands for “industrial justice” (Selznick, 1969) became an almost universal practice in the countries of postwar democratic capitalism, its concrete shape differed between national “labor constitutions” (Dukes, 2008, 2014) and over time, depending on the distribution of political and economic power and the structure and fortunes of the national economy. What the different incorporations of collective bargaining had in common was that they instituted a chain from perceptions of industrial justice at the level of work groups to organizations with voluntary or semi-voluntary membership, like in particular trade unions, which integrated local sentiments into supra-local collective interests to represent them vis-a-vis employers and in national politics. At each stage, provided that union leaderships did not get too far divorced from their grassroots—provided, in other words, that unions remained democratic organizations—worker interests became more generally defined, ultimately as class interests for a national system of industrial relations, taking account of their prospect of realization and backed by increasingly broad collective solidarity. Trade unions, in particular, functioned as transmission belts between the life-world of workers in different workplaces and industries, and the general system of formal legal rules designed to provide for order and fairness in labor markets, by balancing the stark asymmetry inherent in individual rather than collective contracting for work. Importantly, blending the specific into the general though collective bargaining does not require the two sides of a collective agreement to consider the outcome just. For a settlement under what has been called “pluralist” industrial relations, there is no requirement of normative integration; as collective agreements can be and usually are renegotiated every year, they can, as temporary compromises, be signed by both sides in spite of unreconciled values and, in principle, irreconcilable interests.

Collective bargaining has declined recently, as have institutions generally mediating between the market and the state or between the particular and the universal. Attacks on trade unions by governments and employers cut workers off from upward chains of political integration and representation. Industrial change contributed as the emergence of smaller workplaces in the service sector with highly diverse employment systems made it more difficult to link local demands of workers for industrial justice to collective political projects and to support the local enforcement of general rights and regulation. A shift towards contract law, pure and simple, private rather than public and individual instead of collective, cut workers and workplaces off from collective labour law, referring them to state-operated and typically overburdened institutions of rule enforcement and ex post adjudication of grievances.

Efforts to restore the connection of labor law to the realities of labor in today’s workplaces could benefit from social-anthropological work on the formation of collective perceptions of industrial justice and the capacity of workers to act on them in the fragmented reality of today’s employment regime. Currently, my colleague Ruth Dukes and I are reading contemporary studies of “occupational communities” to learn how and where trade unions or similar organizations might reconnect to social groups formed around work and the needs and interests that arise in them. We believe that without more fine-grained knowledge of workers’ micro-level collective experience and of the potential in workplaces for collective normative deliberation and political

action, proposals for institutional change undoing the neoliberal individualization of work contracts and the elimination of status rights that prepared it is doomed to fail. Renewal of labor law overcoming its current crisis, we believe, requires, above all, new procedural law empowering workers on the ground—a configuration of the general and the specific, of unity in diversity, where the former is contributed by state law. At the same time, the latter is left to a new version of the old hybrid institution of industrial citizenship.

### NATION-BUILDING BETWEEN DIVERSITY AND UNITY

The same conceptual frame as proposed for the analysis of endogenous institutional change as a process of decomposition of normative unity by structural diversity, applied as it were in reverse, may be used to understand some of the problems of the composition of structural unity out of normative diversity. My example here is nation-building, or better: state-building—a political process by which a multiplicity of smaller political units is included into an encompassing larger unit, subjecting them to a unified regime internalizing, with a prospect of integrating the diversity of its constituent parts.

How state-building works, if it does, is, to a significant extent a matter of size. Large states can *ceteris paribus* be large only if they enclose more than one society or nation; while they may refer to themselves as nation-states, they are, in fact, almost necessarily multinational states. With large size comes high heterogeneity. As a state expands territorially, it soaks up smaller, internally relatively homogenous communities or nations, and places them under a common, in this sense, universal order. The underlying assumption here is that cultural closeness, up to cultural-communal integration, is, to an important extent, a function of spatial proximity—in other words, is territorially grounded—and that territorially based cultural communities become more different from each other the farther they are apart. The building of large (multi-national) states—*e pluribus unum!*—therefore involves unifying under a common roof, not just more but also more heterogeneous (sub-)nations.

How, then, is multinational state unity imposed on national-societal diversity? Typically in the past, the instrument of choice was conquest followed, in modern times, by acculturation through (re-)education, the latter not necessarily by means of nonviolent rational argument. (Remember that in the Roman Empire, the conquered were allowed to believe whatever they believed in as long as they paid their taxes, contributed auxiliary troops to the Roman army, and did not openly interfere with the cult of the Emperor). Force figured and still figures prominently in integrating diverse local nations into large states, for example, in strict prohibitions on the use of what the conquest has downgraded to regional vernaculars or in harsh criminal sentences for actual or suspected secessionists found guilty of “high treason”. It also continues to figure in the efforts of multinational nation-states to keep their collection of nations together and fight centrifugal, “nationalist” tendencies among them. Ideological indoctrination emphasizing the oneness and uniqueness of the multinational state is abundantly deployed to paper over memories of conquest, civil war, and police bru-



tality, as is economic redistribution from the center to the periphery. Redistribution, however, may be expensive, especially without a colonial empire and the surplus revenues; and Russian-doll identities—Kohl: Pfälzer, Deutscher, Europäer—are hard to sell where past economic exploitation or cultural disrespect have not been forgotten. Subnationalism can thus easily turn into collective particularism, territorially rooted, which may be far more difficult to blend into an encompassing universalism than individuals migrating from one local society to another.

One way to contain nationalist separatism in large multinational nation-states is federalism: the internalization of national pluralism through state institutions that grant, more or less extensive, autonomy to culturally distinct, territorially rooted sub-populations. While sometimes, as in Canada, this does weaken centrifugal tendencies among a nation's nations, it may also strengthen them by setting off long battles on the details of autonomy. It may also provide separatist movements with legal and institutional resources, such as control over regional governments and courts of law. *Autonomy inside* a state may, in this case, be seen as, and may, in fact, amount to, an intermediate step on the way to *sovereignty outside*, as it is viewed by governing regional parties in Scotland and Catalonia. One of the most politically interesting developments these days is the rise of separatist, or sovereigntist, tendencies within large states, followed by the latter turning more “nationalist” and authoritarian to defend their unity; examples are Turkey and China. Analogous problems are faced by imperial powers, where concessions to self-government at their periphery may help assuage but may also strengthen national liberation movements representing “imagined communities” whose image of themselves includes full national independence. The same logic seems to be at work in international organizations, where especially the European Union faces growing resistance among its member states against its *finalité* of unitary and unified government from Hammerfest to Palermo; examples are not just Brexit but also the declining willingness of East European states or a country like Italy to follow and apply the rules laid out for them by the Union as a whole.

To conclude this section, there are limits to universalism in state-building and unified identity formation. Collective particularism, especially of the territorially rooted sort, is often highly resilient and forcefully affects the structure of states and state systems. “Rational” arguments in favor of structural simplification and more effective problem-solving under centralized rule tend to be impotent when facing affective ties to pre-rational identifications with more homogenous, smaller communities. The costs of holding large multinational states and empires together by indoctrination, subsidization and repression are high, and federal devolution of governance is anything but a cure-all.

### **VARIETIES OF CAPITALISM: SETTLEMENTS BETWEEN CAPITALISM AND SOCIETY**

Another case where the universal meets the particular, for the two to work out, with the uncertain event, a *modus vivendi*, is what has come to be called the “varieties of capitalism”. Capitalism as a particular organization of “the economy” is a universalis-

tic, in the sense of unifying, force; an expansionary economic and social regime that depends on a continuous extension of the reach of monetized, “callous cash”-based market exchange, as only monetization makes possible the ongoing accumulation of capital for investment in the accumulation of more capital (what Marx called *Plusmacherei*, or plus-making). In its relentless *Landnahme* (land grabbing, Rosa Luxemburg), both geographically and figuratively speaking, its progress towards universal rule, capitalism may be imagined as a unitary power hitting on a wide diversity of local ways of life, or *Lebenswelten*, all of which it submits to a test for their capital-generating efficiency and their capacity to adjust to the demands of competitive markets. Unless somehow contained, the ensuing contest between local communities and societies is bound to produce winners and losers, at least until the losers learn with time from the winners how to make capitalism and feel welcome and at home in its midst.

While this may be regarded as a process of global convergence, however gradual, those studying capitalism in its concrete historical forms have often emphasized that the battles between diverse pre-capitalist local communities and the advancing capitalist system may result in a quite different outcome—a “variety” of and within capitalism, locally modifying capitalism’s commonalities or even rendering the general concept of capitalism meaningless. Sometimes and in part, such variety may be owed to competitive specialization, more or less successful, as part of an interregional or international division of labor: a sort of particularism within capitalist universalism governed by economic competition. The more interesting case, however, is where capitalist variety is generated by diverse local abilities to fulfill or, to the contrary, resist demands for capitalist unity, together with different degrees of readiness to give up local traditions in favor of a global, universal, “modern” way of life, giving rise to a variety of compromises, or hybrids, between the former and the latter.

Differences in the way capitalism is instituted may be observed on a regional level, as people may be more susceptible to a capitalist *Lebensführung* (Weber) in, for example, Protestant as opposed to Catholic areas, or they were in the past. More important seems to be that the encounter between the unifying force of capitalist rationality and the diversity of local traditionalisms took place in the era of the modern nation-state. This justifies locating capitalist variety at the level of states rather than communities, which, among other things, means that it is at least as much a matter of institutions as of values or habitus. State institutions dealing with the challenges—the constraints and opportunities—of a capitalist economy may be seen as representing and indeed embodying different compromises between a traditional and a modern way of life, economic and social: between the alternative rationalities of input minimization and output maximization, as analyzed by both Marx and Weber or between a catallactic and reciprocal exchange, as conceived by Polanyi.

Capitalist variety is caused by the fact that some pre-capitalist social structures may find it easier than others to accommodate rational capitalist behavior or structural imperatives, either giving themselves up to them or replacing traditional with post-traditional, “modern” institutions of social solidarity. Others, by comparison, may be unable or unwilling to sacrifice particularistic social relations to the universalistic ones of monetized and “meritocratic”, meaning market-driven status assign-

ment, thereby changing from collective-communal ideas of legitimate prosperity to individualistic ones. This may have cultural or structural reasons and old or new roots. For example, as Mancur Olson pointed out, and I have argued in the case of Germany, revolution, defeat in war and foreign occupation may make a country ready for capitalism since they unseat traditional elites and upend a country's communal cohesion. Elsewhere accustomed ways of life, more resilient due to more historical continuity, may demand compromises between capitalism and society that entail a more conflictual relationship between the two and are less easy to adapt to ever-new requirements of capitalist progress. Other factors affecting the terms of national settlements between capitalism and society include a country's location in the world system, the way it is or is not dominated by the international capitalist hegemon of its time, or its capacity to defend its autonomy with military means.

A prominent case in which the varieties of local, more precisely national, capitalisms play a pivotal role is the European Union, in particular its monetary union, EMU. The euro is a unitary currency for, by now, 19 countries, run by a single central bank, the ECB, which is constituted to be independent of national as well as supranational politics. Inserted into the different capitalism-and-society settlements of participating societies—their different “varieties of capitalism”—the common currency produces different costs and benefits “on the ground”. Some countries are better able to live without monetary sovereignty than others, which find it harder to accommodate the centralized monetary policy of the ECB into their particular settlement with, and modification of, the universal demands of a capitalist economy. The result is institutional friction in member states that translate into international conflicts. Since, for political reasons, the euro had to be instituted on the model of the then German currency, the mark, it fits well with the needs of Germany and similar countries whose export-oriented economies thrive on monetary stability and a balanced public budget. It does not, however, fit with the French way of living with and benefitting from capitalism, which requires an active role of the state in the form of heavy public investment in *grands projets* whose benefits for society and the public purse are realized only over time; in between public deficits financed by public borrowing are indispensable. Similarly, Italian capitalism is driven traditionally by domestic consumption, with the growth of supply following demand increases; this comes together with and suits an economy dominated by small family firms producing for local markets. For mass consumer demand to drive economic growth, a labor market regime is helpful that generates wage increases that temporarily exceed productivity increases. As in France, the result may be high rates of inflation. While this did not necessarily matter as long as the national currency could once in a while be devalued to restore a country's international competitiveness, EMU membership deprives states of a central parameter of national economic policy that had been indispensable for the stability of their particular capital-society settlement.

It is not clear at this time how the problems may be resolved that were caused by the mutilation through the supra-nationalization of different, nationally specific arrangements established to accommodate the advance of capitalism. The preferred remedy of the universalists—those who believe in an optimal monetary policy that is

the same for each country—is what they call “structural reforms”, designed to make the countries suffering from a German-style monetary regime fit for it. Such reforms, however, cannot be limited to technicalities of a central bank or fiscal policy or to piecemeal institutional re-engineering. This is not just because of the functional uncertainties re-engineering will inevitably cause but also because historical institutional settlements are tied into affectively rooted national identities that people are willing to defend, especially against pressure from outside or above, and certainly in times of high general uncertainty. The alternative to “reform”, then, might be a return to monetary sovereignty, away from convergence, restoring the functional and cultural complementarity of national political economies by adjusting the international order to fit national capitalism-society settlements rather than reorganizing the latter to fit the universalistic demands of international capitalist political economy. Which forces will prevail as long as the countries in question are still democracies: those of “populist” resilience, defending the particular, or those of economic rationalization through external constraint and internal cultural re-education?

### A BRIEF CONCLUSION

The polarity of universalism and particularism, of the general and the specific, offers a promising conceptual frame for studying the dynamics of social structures. In this paper, I have sketched out, in four short vignettes, (1) a way to analyze the endogenous institutional change in terms of the everyday deconstruction and reconstruction of general social rules through their application to specific situations of social action; (2) a model of the political-institutional integration of dispersed local perceptions of industrial justice into collective interests and political strategies; (3) an account of the merger of separately identified communities into a composite (multi-) national state, of the means used for and the limits faced by it; and (4) an example for the dysfunctions caused by attempts to subject distinct societies with different institutional legacies to unified rule. Other cases could be added, for example, how immigration can increase the diversity that hosts societies have to manage and change the nature of the unity they can achieve. Considering societies as complex configurations of differently specified relationships between the universal and the particular allows us to combine institutional analysis, at both the macro and the micro level, with approaches like social anthropology that manage to pay close attention to the unique features in the internal life of the small communities that constitute, or refuse to constitute, large communities.

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