

DEBATE/DEBATE: THE QUALITY OF INSTITUTIONS. AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE /
LA CALIDAD DE LAS INSTITUCIONES. UNA PERSPECTIVA INTERDISCIPLINAR

Editorial: “Good and bad institutions”: The Issue of Institutional Quality in the Social Sciences

«Buenas y malas instituciones».

La cuestión de la calidad institucional en las ciencias sociales

Manuel Fernández Esquinas (Debate editor)

Institute for Advanced Social Studies, CSIC

“Innovation and Knowledge Transfer” Associated Research Unit, University of Córdoba-CSIC

mfernandez@iesa.csic.es

Received/Recibido: 12/06/2023

Accepted/Aceptado: 11/09/2023



ABSTRACT

This article outlines some of the fundamental theoretical issues of research on institutional quality. It is part of the Debate section of the CENTRA Journal of Social Sciences, where the focus is on contrasting the perspectives of various social science disciplines surrounding this issue. Institutional quality is defined as the set of characteristics of institutions (cultural, regulatory and organisational) that influence their functioning and that condition the fulfillment of the missions for which they have been created. The first part of the article clarifies the terminology regarding the relevance of concepts within the study of institutions. The conceptual frameworks commonly used in Economics, Sociology, Political Science and Administration are then specified. The conclusion summarises the contributions of the articles included in the Debate section regarding institutional quality.

KEYWORDS: institutions; institutional quality; organisations; economic development; law; economics; sociology; politics.

HOW TO REFERENCE: Fernández Esquinas, M. (2023). Editorial: «Buenas y malas instituciones». La cuestión de la calidad institucional en las ciencias sociales. *Revista Centra de Ciencias Sociales*, 2(2), 117–128. <https://doi.org/10.54790/rccs.70>

The Spanish (original) version can be read at <https://doi.org/10.54790/rccs.70>

RESUMEN

Este artículo realiza una introducción al estado de la cuestión de la calidad de las instituciones. Se enmarca en la sección Debate de la Revista CENTRA de Ciencias Sociales, dedicada a contrastar las perspectivas de varias disciplinas de las ciencias sociales sobre este asunto. La calidad institucional se interpreta como el conjunto de rasgos de las instituciones (culturales, regulativos y organizativos) que influyen en su funcionamiento y que condicionan el cumplimiento de las misiones para las que han sido creadas. Se comienza con una aclaración terminológica acerca de la importancia de los conceptos en el estudio de las instituciones. Seguidamente se especifican las bases conceptuales empleadas habitualmente por la economía, la sociología y la ciencia política y de la administración. Se finaliza con un resumen de las contribuciones de los artículos incluidos en el debate.

PALABRAS CLAVE: instituciones; calidad institucional; organizaciones; desarrollo económico; leyes; economía; sociología; política.

1. Introduction

One of the fundamental assumptions of the social sciences is that “institutions matter”. There are solid arguments, based on considerable evidence, that the foundations of the most successful societies lie in sets of institutions in strategic sectors of the state, the economy and civil society. Numerous scholars have focused their efforts on finding those institutional arrangements (whether bureaucracies, legal frameworks, regulations, public policies or other organised aspects of economic and social life) that facilitate the provision of goods and services, coexistence, cooperation and social welfare for broad sectors of society.

Thus, the problem is as relevant as it is complex. The search for and evaluation of good institutions is one of the greatest challenges of the social sciences. It is also one of the most controversial topics. Talking about the institutional implies referring to fundamental aspects of what is considered “the social sphere”, given that institutions are a crystallisation of forms of common life that transcend people. Discussions about desirable institutions are as old and diverse as the social sciences themselves, something unattainable in any treatise or monograph¹.

In recent years, some studies have emerged concerned with identifying qualities of institutions that are susceptible to more precise observation. This article focuses on these rather than on substantive issues of a philosophical or historical nature. These characteristics, usually referring to specific contexts, are often called “institutional quality”. Although there are other similar terms referring to more specific areas (quality of government, the states, democracy, certain organisations, etc.), here the preference is to gather them under the rubric of institutions due to their affinities.

These studies seek to empirically capture those qualities of institutions that generate a “positive” result for some matters of public interest (ease of market transactions, company growth, good management of public administration, the legislative system, etc.). Conversely, they also point out the “negative” consequences of the absence of certain institutions, their lack of effectiveness and

efficiency and even the presence of institutions that prey on the common good. Moreover, they reflect the practical vocation of some branches of social sciences when, by identifying traits that can be documented and compared, they help guide decision-making.

The objective of this editorial, and of the three articles included in the monograph section, is to contribute to a better understanding of institutional quality by contrasting the points of view of different social sciences. This marks the beginning of the *Debate* section of *CENTRA Journal of Social Sciences*. This space is dedicated to relevant research problems that are of cross-disciplinary interest to a wider audience than just specialists in a particular subject. They focus on up-to-date and seek to highlight the keys to the state of knowledge and its implications for our context. They will usually consist of several texts that address different angles of the subject in a critical way.

This *Debate* on the quality of institutions consists of three studies carried out, respectively, from the perspectives of economics, sociology and political science and administration (the importance of anthropology, social psychology, geography and various branches of law is also recognised, although it hasn't been possible to deal with them in this volume). As an editorial, this article introduces the essential elements for critical reflection. Section 2 deals with the problem of defining the institutions and justifies the usefulness of turning to different disciplines. Section 3 sets out the usual conceptual foundations of the aforementioned disciplines when it comes to understanding institutions. Section 4 connects the previous discussion with studies on institutional quality and highlights the contributions of each article. The conclusions point to some evidence about what good institutions are in the light of accumulated research and how they should be understood for practical purposes.

2. What are institutions? A first-order conceptual problem in the social sciences

While the concept of institution is one of the most important in the social sciences, it is also one of the most controversial as it is used in various contexts with very different meanings. Given the number of approaches to institutions, discussing them — as well as institutional quality — without specifying what is being referred to is almost irrelevant. Despite the fact that the aim is not to resolve such a complex terminological issue, a minimum of precision is required in order to focus the discussion.

A distinction should first be made between common sense uses (in dictionaries, politics, the media, official documents, etc.) and social science uses. The *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* (Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy) indicates that an institution is “an established or founded thing”. Other entries refer to “organised aspects of social life, often the fundamental organisations of a state or society”, as well as to legal issues, in the sense that “institutionalising is granting legal status”. The expression “To be an institution” is also mentioned to indicate that something

has prestige due to antiquity and consensus regarding its importance.

These commonly used meanings refer to ordered and important aspects of social life as they are lasting and legitimate, or to regulatory issues, often of a legal nature, which are related to the aforementioned aspects given that some of the most stable social entities are based on them. These are very much in line with the use made by some social scientists, although they add other layers of meaning to the concepts that must be taken into account to interpret specialised research.

The most general conceptions in some social sciences—particularly in sociology and anthropology—distinguish between the fundamental stable aspects that characterise societies. *Community institutions* are based on primary relations, such as lineage, place of birth or certain cultural traits (language, religion, etc.). In contrast, *associative institutions* bring together people who may have fewer community links and are more based on interest and the achievement of a common goal (Abrutyn, 2014). These ideal types of classic origin have been used to explain the transition from traditional to modern societies, and the various “degrees of modernity” of societies, due to the progressive predominance of associative institutions over community ones².

In keeping with this trend of historical change, much of the current thought about institutions revolves around those *associative arrangements* that characterise the contemporary world on many levels of complexity: states—possibly the most important institutions throughout history—, laws and regulatory systems, groups of formal organisations and the norms that make them possible, private corporations and organised collectives of civil society.

The most current definitions in the social sciences tend to refer to human creations designed specifically to accomplish one of these common ends. Nevertheless, it is recognised that, beyond organisational designs, all institutions are shaped by certain community aspects based on the values, practices and strategies, along with inequalities and conflicts, of the groups that participate in them (Marquis et al., 2011). For this reason, contemporary conceptions of institutions seek to highlight the participation of key actors and their ability to shape actions against this background of bonds of sociability. The following is an example of a widely accepted definition: “Institutions are sets of roles and orders of interaction for collective action, which are normatively sanctioned, and which are usually 'taken for granted' in some situations” (Ocasio et al., 2017, p. 6). This definition is consistent with more formal ones referring to rules and regulations that regulate action around an activity through incentives and restrictions (Jupille and Caporaso, 2022).

There are no more coincidences, however. Multiple conceptions of institutions have emerged from this common foundation. Every few years several institutionalists publish dozens of books and hundreds of articles. The state of knowledge on this subject is quite complex and difficult to summarise in an introduction.

However, it is possible to identify typical conceptions about institutions by turn-

ing to the traditions of thought coined by the disciplines of the social sciences. It can be said that there is a "family resemblance" that characterises economists, sociologists and political scientists (the latter partly coincide with some legal experts)³. Some currents of thought straddle these disciplines and, within them, it is common to find several competing sensitivities. Despite running the risk of simplifying, resorting to disciplinary differences is a useful decision to explain what institutions are.

Given that it is not possible to perceive the complexity of life in society, the disciplines consider some parts of reality while detaching themselves from others. In order to grasp something as complex as the social sphere, the social sciences turn to specialised concepts as their main tool. These concepts are not neutral, but rather "charged" certain assumptions about people's behaviour and how the facts they study work. In other words, they are loaded with "metatheoretical assumptions" that function as cognitive lenses through which a field of research views the world. They stand out for prioritising certain spheres of reality as worthy of research, although they cannot be falsified. They merely provide mental starting points for research that come "before theories and methodologies"⁴.

Traditional social science disciplines continue to be relevant for the production of knowledge about society precisely because they employ distinctive metatheoretical assumptions that prove fruitful for understanding the problems in which they specialise. For example, the assumptions about rationality in utilitarian behaviour common in economics have been quite useful in explaining how some markets work, while the more specific sociability assumptions of sociology, reflected, for example, in the concept of "embeddedness," show the importance of culture and bonds based on social relations.

Disciplinary differences in terms of institutions are mainly based on these assumptions to build knowledge about complex social facts, with due regard to multidisciplinary advances. The organisation of the articles in this Debate section follows this criterion.

3. The conceptual foundations of institutional quality studies

For each of the chosen disciplines, we have selected three features that stand out and help link the conceptions of institutions with studies on institutional quality. Namely, 1) the usual definitions of institutions; 2) the predominant behavioural models; and 3) the assumptions about the nature and functioning of social facts (for detailed bibliographic references, please refer to each of the articles).

3.1. Economic perspectives

In economics, institutions are typically defined as interrelated systems of rules and regulations, formal and informal, that constrain, motivate or facilitate economic action. They frequently refer to the “rules of the game”, especially regulations that affect sectors of activity, although some economists also tend to consider the bodies that implement them and some programmes as institutions, according to their significance in the functioning of some economic sectors and in growth in general. Thus, a fundamental problem of economics is conceptual dispersion due to the fact that the term institution has been used as a catch-all for numerous things, from organisations such as the World Bank to informal standards systems (Portes, 2010).

Despite the diversity, the assumptions for interpreting behaviour tend to be based to some extent on rational choice models. The understanding is that the actors participating in the economy tend to use calculation and strategy capabilities to maximise their operations in the market. At the same time, compared to the more orthodox neoclassical economics, institutional economists assume that actors have problems achieving their intentions due to the lack of symmetry in access to information, uncertainties, limitations in knowledge processing and risks of opportunistic behaviours. This often leads to irrational situations and market imbalances.

As far as assumptions about the functioning of institutions are concerned, in economics they are usually considered external to the actors. They are interpreted as a system of incentives and penalties that conditions action strategies. Informal rules are important when interacting with people’s calculations and strategies; however, due to their implicit and cultural nature, as they are difficult to capture, they are taken into account to a lesser extent. They also stem from a specific conception of the constitution of social facts. By giving greater emphasis to the aspects of the individual who adopts utilitarian behaviours to achieve their goals, the social facts to which they pay attention are usually understood as a result of the aggregates of these individual behaviours. In short, in the face of neoclassical approaches, institutional economics has progressively become one of the main currents of economic thought. Many of the economic perspectives on institutions have contributed to the adjustment to reality of the most abstract utilitarian models of economic behaviour and the functioning of markets.

3.2. Sociological perspectives

For decades, sociology, together with anthropology, has had a fairly consensual conception of the meaning of the concept “institution”, accompanied by a multitude of empirical studies (see, for example, Eisenstad, 1974). Interestingly, however, this accumulated knowledge has been largely ignored by the new institutionalisms in economics and some branches of political science since the 1980s, which have tended to use their own definitions.

Regardless of the diversity of theoretical paradigms in sociological thought during the twentieth century, for contemporary sociology, institutions are rather cultural constructs formed by values and networks of meanings. They are sets of rules, roles and orders of interaction for collective action, based on values, which are normatively sanctioned and culturally assimilated. Institutions appear as organised and complex areas of social life that articulate the realisation of collective purposes, or as “assemblages” between symbolic and material aspects—or planes of culture and social structure⁵. Institutions and organisations are frequently seen as faces of the same reality. This is why many institutionalisms of a sociological nature deal with organisations—with the internal dynamics of organisations or with organisational fields or sectors—, although some focus on their symbolic aspects in particular.

As far as behavioural models are concerned, “culturalists” models are more frequent in sociology. The assumption is that the actors, who are rational and act normally in this way, may be motivated by assimilated norms and shared beliefs. Due to the processes of socialisation and the existence of primary social bonds, non-rational elements are commonplace. These elements are mixed with others of a “conflictivist” nature that take into account different degrees of wealth, power and domination. In other words, people actively work on processes of social construction to bring values, norms and interests to collective forms, which endure and end up crystallising in institutions. Institutions, however, are also constructed from positions of interest and distribution of resources that give rise to divisions in primary groups or social classes, and to behaviours that respond to assemblages of unequal identities and positions (these ideas are shared with some political perspectives that are discussed later).

Thirdly, sociological perspectives focus more on some mechanisms when explaining the functioning of institutions. Some institutions may be merely *regulatory* and are designed to impose very specific behaviours. The participants perceive them as external and decide to comply with them to a greater or lesser degree, or are forced to do so. Other institutions may be *generative* or internal to the actors. People acquire them through socialisation mechanisms and make them inherent in a repetitive action that is learned with skills and routines. When internalised and taken for granted, they appear embedded in some behaviours that become the frequent pattern in a situation. Consequently, some successful institutions manifest as supra-individual social realities that reproduce by their ability to influence people through socialisation, distribution of resources and livelihoods, persuasion or coercion.

3.3. Political and legal perspectives

The definitions are more varied in political science and in the disciplines related to administration. When talking about institutions, many political scientists refer to state organisations, whose main foundation are legal matters, where social groups and competing political actors participate. Nevertheless, according to the schools of thought, they also refer to laws that are fundamental to the constitution and

functioning of the public sector. This gives rise to different conceptualisations that vary depending on the preferred objects of study, being these the bureaucracies, laws and regulations that underpin the public sector or the interaction between them.

Assumptions about behaviour also vary depending on the schools of thought. In general, however, there are more overlaps with the versions that favour the rational behaviour of actors over those that focus on cultural issues, although the more strategic behavioural models are applied to already constituted situations from which power and authority are exercised. In the explanations related to the formation of institutions, long-term historical processes acquire importance, where more attention is paid to cultural influences and critical junctures. An important concept is “path dependence”. This highlights how political institutions depend on the structures of power and legitimacy that are implemented in each historical and geographical context (as “critical crossroads”), giving rise to stable situations that condition the subsequent scope for action and that are difficult to reverse once they have been consolidated.

Finally, as regards the types of explanation, those that are *regulatory* or *normative* in nature predominate. A feature shared by some branches of political institutionalism is their more marked differentiation between institutions and organisations, tending to see them separately. For some authors, institutions are strictly rules and regulations, whether formal or informal. Organisations are either the means established to implement such rules (usually public bureaucracies, parties, trade unions, lobbies or other political actors), or the targets of the objectives (companies, interest groups or organised groups of people) to be influenced.

The aforementioned assumptions represent models of thought that have a greater presence in some specialised groups when addressing research problems of interest. At times they are identified with schools, networks of authors or emblematic places. However, it should be remembered that it is not currently possible to speak of radical divisions between disciplines, nor are there better or worse points of view. The usefulness of each variant depends on its suitability for the problems being studied. Here, it is important that the ways in which institutions are conceptualised are significant in studies on institutional quality. Nevertheless, it is necessary to recognise that the nature of the conceptual problem surrounding institutions is major, especially the selective forgetting of some disciplines or schools of thought with respect to the contributions of others, and the fact that it represents one of the most important barriers to advancing knowledge.

The articles in this *Debate* section bring together a series of relevant contributions to understand which characteristics are favoured in institutions, what is meant by institutional quality and how it is studied empirically. Furthermore, they are also relevant when designing institutions or acting on existing ones.

4. What do we know about institutional quality? A summary of the Debate articles

The article "The Quality of Institutions and their Relationship with the Economy: A Review of the Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Studies" (Pedraza Rodríguez, 2023) shows how the institutional approach has become one of the most relevant in economic science. The author identifies the ideas that underpin this conception, from the theory of transaction costs to the latest advances in historical institutionalism and the theories of organisations and innovation.

He points out how economists often use the concept of institutional quality to assess the effects of certain institutions on the economic performance of countries. They use it to inform reforms through laws or regulations, and bodies that affect investors, businesses and consumers. Empirical studies at country or region analysis levels draw on available official indicators, surveys and expert assessments. These methods have given rise to sources that enable research into the explanatory variables that influence aspects such as growth, employment and equity in the distribution of wealth.

The results of the review highlight the importance of several dimensions that define the quality of institutions: first, those dimensions related to transparency, the absence of corruption and conditions of legal certainty in general; second, the effectiveness of regulations, together with an adequate balance between bureaucratic burdens, controls to ensure good practices and freedom of action; and third, measures to promote equity and prevent the existence of clientelistic networks in private or public corporations.

Together, these studies provide good examples of how quality institutions are integral to the proper functioning of the economy in terms of its growth and equity. Attention is also drawn to the advantages of multidisciplinary collaboration for observing dimensions that are not captured with the usual methodologies of economics (particularly social ties and cultural norms). The point is made that taking into account other levels of analysis—organisational fields and complex strategic institutions, systems of laws and cultural norms—can help identify internal situations of regions or countries that provide greater precision about what happens within them and avoid problems of circularity in the analyses.

The article "Institutional quality from a sociological perspective: Contributions and challenges" (Espinosa Soriano, 2023) begins by describing the usual meanings of institutions as symbolic elements of culture, linked to relationships of sociability, which appear assembled in groups of organisations that produce goods and services, along with many other elements of social life, such as roles, social classes and identities.

The author turns to two emblematic working groups that have shown the importance of institutional quality at different levels of analysis; first, studies between the meso—groups of organisations—and macro-social—regimes or states—level, mainly in sociol-

ogy of development. Findings on the *capacity of the state* are highlighted. This capacity is due to the combination of characteristics of traditional Weberian bureaucracies: the presence of qualified professionals, political independence and predictability. Furthermore, however, they find that the *proactivity* and *social embeddedness* of institutions are essential for explaining their ability to influence socio-economic development and welfare.

The author then turns to the level of analysis of the organisations. Although this field of research is very diverse, it makes less use of the institutional quality label. Based on some emblematic empirical works that observe the influence of culture on the results of organisations, the article highlights the complementary role of studies at the micro or meso level in real organisations as culture and other informal elements influence what companies and other public or private organisations produce and, therefore, can be considered aspects of organisational quality.

Finally, the article “The quality of public sector institutions: A critical review of studies on ‘good governance’ and ‘institutional weakness’” (Martínez-Sánchez and Gosálbez Pequeño, 2023) offers an overview of the highly complex governmental sphere and its relations with the law. After delineating the conceptual aspects of institutions at the interface between public bureaucracies and legal norms, the most emblematic works that have sought to make the concept of institutional quality operational are reviewed. On the one hand, those studies on the “quality of government” that focus on the conditions that favour effective and efficient policies and bureaucracies, where the dimensions of quality are related to *impartiality*, *the quality of public services* and *the absence of corruption*. On the other hand, he also looks at those studies on “institutional weakness and strength” that focus on the problems of law implementation, where dimensions of institutional weakness (as opposed to strength) are *the non-compliance*, *instability* and *insignificance* of laws. Due to the confluences of this speciality with law, the article includes a brief counterpoint from the legal perspective that deals with the conditions for “good legislators” to exist.

5. Conclusion

Together, the articles in this Debate section provide an overview of how institutions are considered by academic research, and of the efforts made by some schools of thought to identify the nature and effects of key institutions on democratic societies.

There is always a risk when answering the question, “What are the good and bad institutions?”, that heads this article, especially in a limited space. Any response requires the collaboration of a multitude of efforts from various perspectives, carried out in a sustained manner over time, to reach an empirically based agreement, founded on consensual values. However, a significant contribution of these articles is that they make it possible to identify what much of the accumulated research has pointed to as a “catalogue of traits” of good institutions in the economy, in the organisations of social life and in the public sphere.

The reviews of the three groups of studies suggest that some characteristics of institutions function as causes that, when present, generate positive effects. In addition,

they suggest that they are not universal in scope, nor does their existence operate in a linear or mechanical fashion; rather, they are a configurational phenomenon. Different combinations of institutional traits have diverse effects in distinct contexts and historical moments as they interact with the characteristics of each country, region or place in the world.

They also reveal some challenges of current research. The first is finding the combinations of characteristics—or essential qualities—that are necessary, sufficient or both in institutions that affect the economy, politics and sectors of society, in addition to empirically confirming the extent to which those configurations are specific to each environment. Then, the challenge of identifying the socio-economic conditions—or background—that contribute to the emergence and consolidation of these institutions. Last but not least, it is essential to think about institutions through precise concepts, which allow their complexity to be comprehensively captured, and which help to advance knowledge in a cumulative way. This requires a multidisciplinary collaboration that recognises the efforts made by the various disciplines and specialities of the social sciences.

6. Bibliography

- Abrutyn, S. (2014). *Revisiting institutionalism in sociology: putting the "institution" back in institutional analysis*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203795354>
- Coleman, J. (1991). *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Eisenstad, S. (1974). Voz 'Instituciones'. In *Enciclopedia Internacional de las Ciencias Sociales*. Madrid: Editorial Aguilar.
- Espinosa Soriano, P. (2023). La calidad institucional desde la perspectiva sociológica: contribuciones y retos al estado de la cuestión. *Revista Centra de Ciencias Sociales*, 2(2), 149-166. <https://doi.org/10.54790/rccs.74>
- Jupille, J. & Caporaso, J. A. (2022). *Theories of Institutions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139034142>
- Marquis, C., Lounsbury, M. & Greenwood, R. (Eds.) (2011). *Communities and organizations* (Series: Research in the Sociology of Organizations, vol. 33). Bradford: Emerald Publishers. [https://doi.org/10.1108/S0733-558X\(2011\)33](https://doi.org/10.1108/S0733-558X(2011)33)
- Martínez-Sánchez, W. & Gosálbez Pequeño, H. (2023). La calidad de las instituciones del sector público: una revisión crítica de los estudios sobre el «buen gobierno» y la «debilidad institucional». *Revista Centra de Ciencias Sociales*, 2(2), 167-186. <https://doi.org/10.54790/rccs.3>
- Merton, R. K. (1968). *Teoría y estructura sociales*. México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Ocasio, W. & Gai, S. L. (2020). Institutions: Everywhere But Not Everything. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 29(3), 262-271. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492619899331>

- Pedraza Rodríguez, J. A. (2023). La calidad de las instituciones y su relación con la economía: una revisión de las bases conceptuales y estudios empíricos. *Revista Centra de Ciencias Sociales*, 2(2), 129-148. <https://doi.org/10.54790/rccs.38>
- Portes, A. (2010). *Economic Sociology: A Systematic Inquiry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400835171>
- Scott, R. (1996). *Institutions and Organizations*. London: SAGE.
- Velasco Maíllo, H. M., Díaz de Rada Brun, A., Cruces Villalobos, F., Fernández Suárez, R., Jiménez de Madariaga, C. & Sánchez Molina, R. (2006). *La sonrisa de la institución. Confianza y riesgos en sistemas expertos*. Madrid: Editorial Universitaria Ramón Areces.

Notes

- 1 Some authors argue that institutions should be the preferred object of study of some social sciences, especially sociology. Among the classic authors, for example, this was the stance of Émile Durkheim, also shared in more recent times by James Coleman (1991), among others.
- 2 The fundamental notions of these kinds of institutions have their roots in classical thinkers, such as Ferdinand Tönnies' dichotomy of *community vs. society* and Émile Durkheim's dichotomy of *mechanical vs. organic solidarity*.
- 3 Other disciplines have specific conceptions about institutions tailored to their study problems. For example, cultural anthropology, social psychology and human geography, as well as various branches of philosophy. These conceptions cannot be dealt with in the current Debate due to space constraints; however, they have common ground with those discussed. See, for example, Jupille and Caporaso (2022), Abrutyn (2014), Scott (1996), Velasco et al. (2006).
- 4 In this article, the term "metatheoretical assumptions" is employed in the manner used by Alejandro Portes (2010) in his work on economic sociology.
- 5 The division of the components of institutions into the planes of culture and social structure (as an analytical tool to capture the complexity of real institutions) can be considered the "main current" of sociological thought about institutions, exemplified by Robert Merton (1968), and elaborated more recently by Portes et al. (2010).

The author

Manuel Fernández Esquinas is a CSIC researcher at the Institute for Advanced Social Studies (IESA). He holds a PhD in Sociology and Political Science from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. His lines of research are related to the social processes of innovation in various aspects of R&D systems. He has led projects on the training of researchers, science policy and evaluation, university-business relations, the socio-economic impact of R&D, business innovation and the behaviour of the population with regard to innovation. He is currently researching the quality of institutions in R&D systems, the social structures of innovation and the processes of knowledge transfer and use.