

Why Humans Create Institutions

Eleanor Thorpe

In this essay I will discuss how and why humans create institutions to establish political order, manage conflict, and legitimize authority in complex societies. I will draw primarily from the book *“The Origins of Political Order”* by political scientist Francis Fukuyama in which he examines how institutions have evolved from informal systems to rational-legal structures, whilst also discussing the limitations of state power. Francis Fukuyama’s analysis of the development of political institutions demonstrates that political order is not a modern invention, but a response to fundamental problems inherent in human societies. Institutions have been developed over time to manage conflict, cooperation, and authority beyond small social localized groups. Institutions are not neutral, but instead they change and are shaped by power, politics, society, and ideas of legitimacy.

Fukuyama described how societies without formal political institutions can provide systems that allow for cohesion, but they often generate conflicts between competing groups for power and resources as the organizations are based primarily on informal hierarchies and loyalties.¹ Without structure, rules, and centralized authority, enforcement depends on the individual rather than a consistent framework. Whilst pre-state societies did have forms of structure and rules based on customs and traditions, the main issue was a lack of centralized and impersonal enforcement. As a result of these limitations, political institutions emerged to enable cooperation and stable frameworks. However, political institutions and formalized authority also have their limitations in the form of structured inequalities. In early societies legitimacy was often grounded by tradition, superstitions and heavily rooted in faith. Authority was often justified by the shared belief systems of the people, although tensions were still present. This changed significantly during the transition towards the Age of Reason. During this period legitimacy moved towards more rational and legal forms. Specifically, where authority is derived from agreed rules and procedures and not based solely on belief, this emphasizes how the development of political order is closely associated with changes in how authority is justified. This represents a progressive shift towards more consistent forms of political legitimacy.

The emergence of the French Revolution highlights Fukuyama’s argument that political development must depend on a balance between strong state institutions, the rule of law and accountability.² The French Revolution displays the tensions that were and still are present in the efforts to ensure the balance that Fukuyama wrote of. The Declaration of the Rights of the Man and of the Citizen³ was a key moment for political legitimacy and the recognition of individual rights and equality. Although these rights are not implemented by the individual but by the state authorities, and so this raises the question of whether any political system can uphold

¹ (Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (London: Profile Books, 2011), pp. 26–29)

² Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalisation of Democracy* (London: Profile Books, 2014), pp. 15–19.

³ *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789), Article 1.

their principles, particularly in relation to individual rights. In the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, it lists that “*men are born and remain free and equal in rights*”. This sentence highlights the shift towards legitimacy based on universally agreeable principles rather than the previous hierarchy set up, this directly links to Francis Fukuyama’s argument that stable politics depends on the interaction between state power, rule of law and accountability. However, the declaration depends on the state’s institutions to enforce and protect those rights, and to define them. This causes tensions due to the dependence on authority structures.

When political systems develop further, they become structured and systematized. Institutions evolve into complex “man and machine” bureaucratic systems governed by administration, rules and procedures; these are necessary to manage large groups of people, states and ensure stability. These developments provide efficiency, structure, consistency, and in theory, fairness. One of the main limitations of the “man and machine” bureaucratic institutions is that they prioritize process and procedure over individuals and need, this can create a de-humanized gap and tensions between human agency and institutional control. This is supported by Max Weber who wrote that “*The fully developed bureaucratic mechanism compares with other organizations exactly as does the machine with the non-mechanical modes of production.*”⁴.

Political systems have evolved over time as a necessary response to the challenges presented by ever-changing historical, cultural, and social factors. The political systems did not develop as a fixed model but instead have been shaped by the human need for structure and control in large populations and states. Limitations found in earlier authority systems which then transitioned into structured governance highlight the unfeasibility of earlier localized systems and the need for institutions and the attempts to address and create structured governance. This adaptation continues today and is part of the process of governance. Institutions can promote fairness but often reflect existing power structures. This can create more rigid, rule-based authoritarian systems that risk causing tensions within society due to impersonality.

In conclusion, Institutions provide the structure and stability necessary to support and sustain large and complex societies. They emerged in response to the limitations of the state of nature and the need to organise, legitimise and constrain authority. The transition from faith-based, localised systems to rational-legal frameworks reflects an ongoing effort to manage and justify power. However, these developments have not eliminated inequality or corruption; instead, they often reproduce these issues within institutional structures. Centralised authority can create opportunities for corruption where accountability is weak. This reinforces existing power imbalances and highlights that political order is therefore not a fixed success. The human challenge to find balance within institutions and state governance continues to develop alongside the changes in society and politics. It is an evolving process that requires continual examination of how authority, legitimacy, power, and corruption are organised and managed within society.

⁴ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

References

Fukuyama, Francis (2011) *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*. London: Profile Books, pp. 26–29.

Fukuyama, Francis (2014) *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalisation of Democracy*. London: Profile Books, pp. 15–19.

Weber, Max (1978) *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 988

National Assembly of France (1789) Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, Article 1.